

# First omicron coronavirus case detected in Gaza Strip

Author:

Sun, 2021-12-26 23:43

GAZA: The Palestinian Health Ministry said on Sunday it had identified the first case of the omicron coronavirus variant in the Gaza Strip.

The carrier is a Gaza resident who was infected within the coastal territory, ministry official Majdi Dhair told a news conference.

Dhair said this meant the variant, first identified in southern Africa and Hong Kong last month, existed in Gaza and was now spreading among the population.

The discovery poses a new challenge to the enclave's under-developed health system.

"We are ahead of difficult days. It is expected that the omicron variant will spread fast," he told reporters.

Gaza, with a population of 2.2 million people, has registered 189,837 COVID-19 infections and 1,691 deaths.

Dhair urged Gazans to get vaccinated, putting the percentage of those who had already received shots at around 40 percent.

In the Israeli-occupied West Bank, three cases of omicron variant had been detected among Palestinians on Dec. 16 and the number had since risen to 23 among the 3.1 million population, Palestinian health authorities said.

In a separate development, Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett went into isolation at home after his 14-year-old daughter tested positive for the coronavirus, his office said.

Bennett awaits the results of a COVID-19 PCR test.

Bennett left the weekly meeting of his Cabinet and headed home after learning of his daughter's positive test, which came amid fast-spreading infections in Israel caused by the omicron variant.

The premier's daughter had been vaccinated against COVID-19, his office said. It did not disclose whether she had been infected by omicron or the delta variant also prevalent in Israel.

Before the Cabinet session began, Bennett, who had a vaccine booster shot on Aug. 20, and other members of his government took rapid antigen tests and received negative results.

Bennett drew public criticism after his wife and children went on holiday abroad early this month, despite his calls for Israelis to help stem Omicron's spread by cancelling plans to fly overseas.



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## [Somali President, PM trade accusations over delays to ongoing elections](#)

Author:

Reuters

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Sun, 2021-12-26 23:37

MOGADISHU: Somalia's president and prime minister each accused the other on Sunday of holding up ongoing parliamentary elections, in a spat analysts say may distract the government from its fight against the Al-Qaeda-linked insurgency Al-Shabab.

Parliamentary elections began on Nov. 1 and were supposed to be completed by Dec. 24, but one newly elected lawmaker said that as of Saturday only 24 of

275 representatives had been elected.

"The Prime Minister is posing a serious threat to the electoral process and overstepping his mandate," the office of President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed said in a statement on Sunday.

Prime Minister Mohamed Hussein Roble's office later put out its own statement saying the president had spent "so much time, energy and finances in frustrating the national elections" and was "derailing the electoral process."

The United States late on Sunday called for a credible and rapid conclusion to the elections.

"The United States is deeply concerned by the continuing delays and by the procedural irregularities that have undermined the credibility of the process," the US State Department said.

Newly elected parliamentarian Mohamed Sheikh Mursal said only 24 lawmakers had been confirmed as elected as of Saturday, one day after the process had been due to be completed.

Under Somalia's complex indirect electoral process, regional councils are meant to choose a senate. Clan elders are then meant to pick members of the lower house, which then picks a new president at a date not yet fixed.

In April, factions of the security forces allied to Mohamed and Roble seized areas of the capital, as the prime minister and opposition both opposed a move to extend the president's four-year term by another two years.

Clashes between the two groups forced

<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/bowing-pressure-somalias-president-...>

between 60,000 and 100,000 people to flee their homes.

The confrontation was resolved when the president put Roble in charge of security and of organizing the delayed elections.

Roble's Sunday statement said he would hold meetings on Monday to find ways to speed up the election.

President Mohamed's office also said he would hold a separate meeting on the elections and "agreeing on a capable leadership to spearhead timely, and transparent elections" without offering more details on how long the process might take.

Somalia, which has had only limited central government since 1991, is trying to reconstruct itself with the help of the United Nations. It had intended to hold its first direct elections in more than three decades this year in a rare victory against chronic instability in the country.



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## [Arab coalition conducts air raids on Houthi targets across Yemen](#)

Sun, 2021-12-26 22:31

AL-MUKALLA: The Arab coalition supporting the Yemeni government carried out new airstrikes on Sunday, targeting a military camp in Houthi-held Sanaa and rebel reinforcements in Marib Governorate.

The coalition said in a statement on Sunday that it destroyed weapon depots at a military camp controlled by the Houthis, urging residents not to pass

through or congregate near targeted military sites in Sanaa.

Residents in Sanaa reported hearing large explosions as images on social media showed smoke billowing from the targeted sites.

On Saturday, the coalition launched a large-scale military operation against the Houthis in Yemen, shortly after a missile fired by the militia killed two civilians in Saudi Arabia's Jazan.

The coalition vowed to punish the Houthis for targeting civilians in Yemen and across the border in the Kingdom.

At the same time, local media reported on Sunday that the latest airstrikes by the coalition in have prompted the Houthis into replacing officials and arresting members on suspicion of being coalition spies.

Quoting a source close to the Houthi movement's Supreme Council, Al-Sahil Al-Gharbi, a news site affiliated with Yemen's former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, reported that the militia was taken aback by the coalition air raids on their command rooms, secret military sites and officials.

The movement accused guards of sending key coordinates to the coalition and subsequently changed security and intelligence protocols, including residences, guards, communications and meeting times, the news site said.

On the ground, coalition jets struck Houthi military gatherings and vehicles in the province of Marib, where government forces are battling aggressive rebel attacks, Abdu Abdullah Majili, a Yemeni army spokesperson, told Arab News on Sunday.

The airstrikes thwarted Houthi attempts to reinforce their dwindling forces in Marib and paved the way for government forces to retake territory, Majili said.

Dozens of combatants were killed in heavy fighting between government troops and the Houthis over the past 24 hours in sites south of Marib, as the Houthis continuously attacked government loyalists.

Majili said that the latest fierce fighting occurred around the Al-Balaq Al-Sharqi mountain range on the southern edges of the city.

Thousands of combatants and civilians have been killed since February when the Houthis renewed a major military offensive to capture the energy-rich city of Marib, the government's last bastion in the north.

Also in Marib, government officials and local human rights activists strongly condemned a Houthi missile strike on a petrol station in Marib that claimed the lives of three civilians.

A missile fired by the Houthis on Saturday exploded inside a compound of buildings, an oil station and an automobile repair shop in Marib city, killing three civilians, including a child, and wounding eight more.



Two more missiles fired by the militia also hit other locations in the densely populated city over the past two days.

Muammar Al-Eryani, Yemen minister of information, culture and tourism, tweeted that the Houthis intensified missile attacks on residential areas in Marib after failing to make military gains on the fronts outside the city.

“The targeting of residential areas in Marib using three Iranian-made ballistic missiles is a hysterical and cowardly act. It reveals the scale of losses the Houthis have incurred on fronts and its indifference to the fate of millions of residents in the city,” he said.

Separately, Yemen President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi on Saturday appointed Awadh Mohammed Al-Wazer Al-Awlaki, an influential tribal leader, an MP and a member of the General People’s Congress party, as new governor of the oil-rich province of Shabwa, replacing Mohammed Saleh bin Adeo, who was named as a presidential adviser.



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Arab coalition launches airstrikes on military targets in Yemen’s Sanaa

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## Abu Dhabi crown prince holds talks with Moroccan PM

Author:

Sun, 2021-12-26 00:28

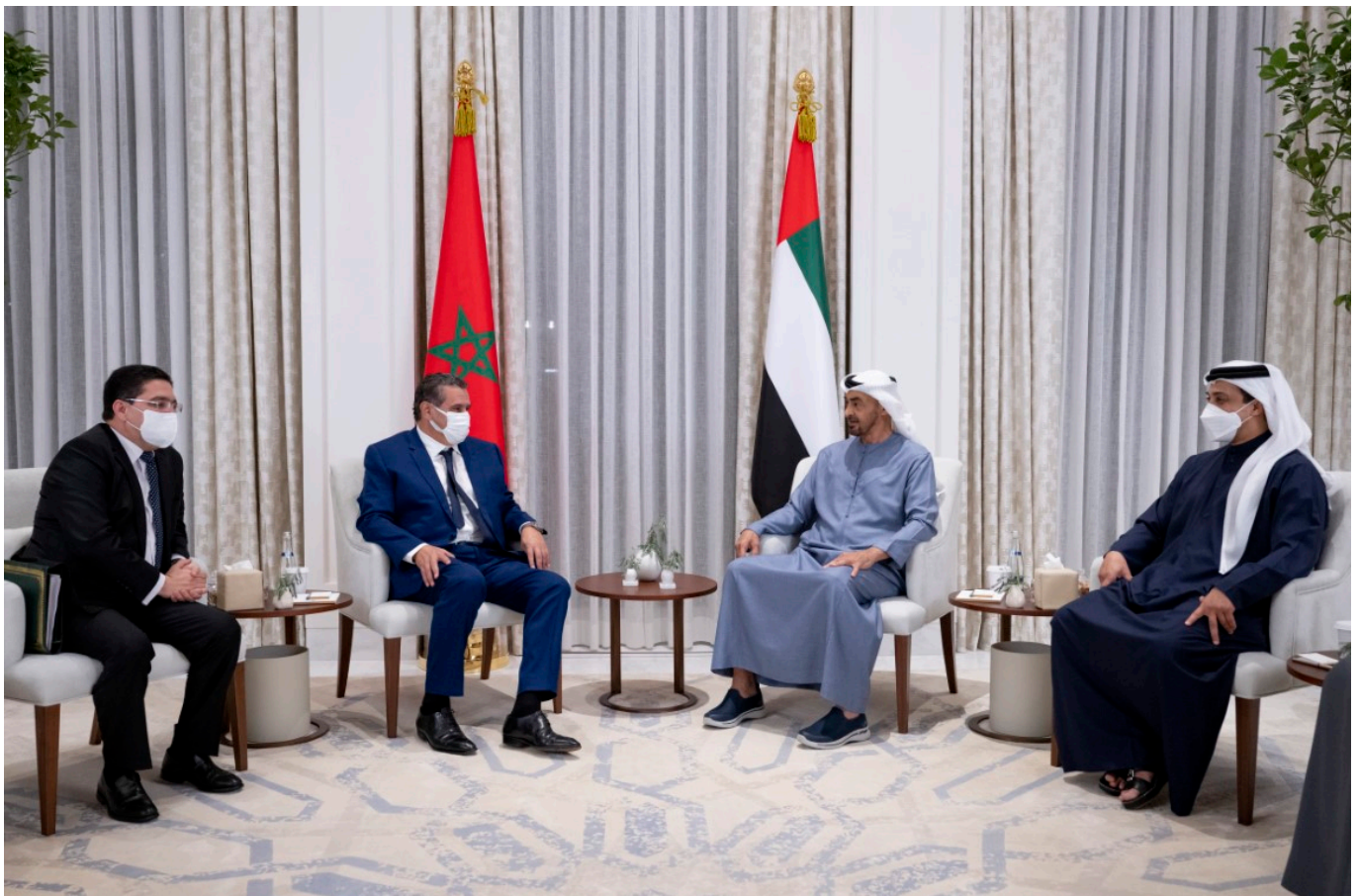
RIYADH: Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed held talks with Moroccan Prime Minister Aziz Akhannouch, who is currently on a working visit to the UAE, state news agency WAM reported on Saturday.

During the meeting, they discussed the now-running Expo 2020 Dubai and the importance of the participation of Arab countries in sharing the latest sustainability innovations and solutions with various participating countries.

The two sides discussed opportunities of further strengthening bilateral relations and the various aspects of cooperation, especially in areas of investment and economy, to spur the development drive in both countries.

“They also reviewed the latest developments in the Arab region and exchanged views over a number of regional and international issues of common interest,” WAM said.

Sheikh Mohammed also congratulated Akhannouch on his appointment as prime minister and the trust given to him by the king of Morocco to head the government, “wishing him success in his duties to serve his country and achieve the aspirations of his people for development and prosperity.”







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## [Why a hybrid of online and classroom learning may be GCC schools' way forward](#)

Sat, 2021-12-25 22:57

DUBAI: Remote learning, where the student and the teacher are not physically present in a traditional classroom environment, has become the norm in most parts of the world that have been in the grip of the COVID-19 pandemic since 2020.



Information is relayed through discussion boards, video conferencing and online assessments. Educational activities have assumed a variety of formats and methods, most of which use computer technology over the Internet.

Now, with new variants of concern emerging such as the omicron strain, and infections again on the rise in many parts of the world, it increasingly looks as if remote learning, instead of being a stopgap, is here to stay.



Iraqi pupils wearing face masks attend class on the first day of the new academic year in Mosul. (AFP)

Disrupting the school year for more than 1.7 billion students across the world, the pandemic has accelerated an existing trend toward digitalization, changing the way in which people study, work and interact.

What began as a temporary solution to allow schools and universities to complete the academic year while conforming to stringent social-distancing regulations has become a fixture of the education system.

Online education is now tightly woven into models of schooling, overturning the past reliance on traditional classroom teaching. As a result, a new hybrid model of education that combines both online and in-person teaching has emerged.

Many educators in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries say that the combination is a more “practical” and “economical” approach to learning in the 21st century. Jeffrey Smith, director of school partnerships at iCademy Middle East, believes blended learning, or hybrid learning, is the way forward.

“Today’s students and families are demanding more flexibility than a traditional education model can support,” Smith told Arab News, highlighting the evolving demands of the modern workplace as one of the main factors driving this change.

“They need quick and affordable access to information and classes to acquire skills.”

Developments in the education technology sector, known as EdTech, also reflect the new trend. Demand for online learning solutions has skyrocketed during the pandemic. The EdTech sector, which was valued at \$227 billion in 2020, is forecast to grow to \$404 billion by 2025.

Demand for online and hybrid courses at GCC universities had already been growing well before the pandemic. “Online learning produces better retention rates, which means higher graduation rates and more revenue for the universities,” Smith said



Teachers and lecturers have also had to adapt to the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic. (AFP)

In Saudi Arabia, the GCC’s biggest education market, some 77 percent of teaching was conducted remotely over the course of the pandemic, according to a study by cloud computing company Citrix Systems published in June.

The study, which surveyed a sample of C-level executives, IT managers, teachers and administrators at Saudi universities, showed that a majority (81 percent) believe the hybrid learning model will improve the learning experience over the next academic year, with half agreeing the new method will significantly improve learning.

Leading academic institutions in the UAE, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain and Kuwait



have also committed to digitalizing their education sectors.

Unsurprisingly, the Middle East and Africa's EdTech and smart-classroom market is projected to soar to \$7.1 billion by 2027, according to a study by The Insight Partners.

Europe currently has the largest EdTech community, with more than half of the continent's top 20 EdTech companies based in the UK – one of the largest suppliers of smart-education solutions to the Gulf region.

One example is Firefly, a portal used by more than a million students, teachers and parents, available in more than 600 schools in the UAE, Qatar, Oman and Saudi Arabia.



The Middle East and Africa's EdTech and smart-classroom market is projected to soar to \$7.1 billion by 2027. (AFP file photo)

The growing popularity of online learning is evident at the Applied Science University in Bahrain, where students were given the choice to either return to campus after the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions or to continue their studies remotely for the 2021 academic year.

"We had 25 percent of our students who decided to study on campus and 75 percent who decided to study from home," Ghassan Aouad, ASU president, told Arab News.

While negative "psychological" impact of the pandemic on students is a major concern, Aouad says, online learning has major advantages.

"We have delivered the learning outcomes to our students in the highest quality and, in fact, it may have been advantageous by having all the lectures recorded for them," he said.

The shift online has also enhanced IT skills, improved time management and increased independent learning among students, he said.

## **INNUMBERS**

1.7 billion – Students who had their education disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

460 million – Young people worldwide who cannot access remote-learning programs.

\$404 billion – Global value of the EdTech sector by 2025, up from \$227 billion in 2020.

To be certain, the hybrid model is not without its drawbacks, considering that nearly half the world's population does not have ready access to the Internet. For institutions lacking the right online infrastructure, problems with technology, accessibility and communication between teachers, students and parents are fairly common.

A high number of schools and universities were not prepared for the transition when the pandemic struck, but were forced to adopt the distance learning model as a way to stay afloat.

In fact, according to a recent UNICEF report, at least 460 million students worldwide cannot access remote learning programs because they lack the necessary devices or infrastructure.

In the interests of inclusivity, schools and universities are working hard to return students to classroom learning. In the UAE, recently announced safety protocols have been designed to facilitate a return to 100 percent in-person learning from Jan. 2022.

Similarly, the Saudi government has spent more than SR1 billion on upgrading facilities in accordance with safety protocols to ensure the smooth return of students and staff to schools and universities.

The Saudi Food and Drug Authority has also approved the Pfizer vaccine for children aged 5-11, which will allow pupils in that age group to return to the classroom.

Although online models of learning have provided a practical solution to meet the needs of the pandemic, few believe traditional classroom learning has had its day.





Almost half of the world's population has no internet access. (AFP)

"I can't imagine the hybrid model being 50-50," Aouad said. "On-campus, traditional learning will be dominant with an element of online learning. This will become the norm, especially for general studies types of courses. For practical courses, however, students will have to be on campus."

Furthermore, according to him, the interpersonal, analytical, and critical-thinking skills that students need to succeed in many professions cannot be taught over a webcam.

Parents naturally are divided over the benefits of in-person and remote learning. A recent UAE government poll involving 28,171 participants found that 59 percent of parents would rather their children learn remotely, versus 41 percent who were in favor of in-person classes.

George Tharakan, whose 10-year-old child attends the Apple International Community School in Dubai, believes learning from home has improved family interaction, eliminated school bullying and allowed parents to help with assignments and activities.



Interpersonal, analytical, and critical-thinking skills that students need to succeed in many professions cannot be taught over a webcam. (Supplied)

On the other hand, he admits that his child may be missing out on formative interactions with other students, neglecting their writing skills in favor of typing and verbal communication, and suffering disruptions caused by technical issues.

Aaliyah Khan, a mother of two, was impressed by the rapid and smooth transition to online learning during the pandemic, but remains a supporter of traditional classroom learning.

“Online learning should only be out of necessity, not out of choice. I am not a big fan of a hybrid model either, as it includes exposure to screen time, which I do not support,” Khan told Arab News.

“With face-to-face learning, students socialize and build healthy connections. That is why we humans are called social animals. Apart from social skills, the children can concentrate better and participate more actively in classroom learning.”









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