

News in brief

◆ **Former pope Benedict**, 95, who in 2013 became the first pontiff in 600 years to step down, is "very sick", his successor Pope Francis said yesterday, asking the church to pray for him. The Vatican later said in a statement Benedict had suffered a sudden "worsening" of his health in recent hours. It also said his condition was "under control" and that he was receiving constant medical attention. "I would like to ask all of you for a special prayer for Pope Emeritus Benedict, who, in silence, is sustaining the Church," Francis said in his surprise announcement in Italian at the end of his weekly general audience.



Former pope Benedict is 'very sick', Pope Francis says

"Let us remember him. He is very sick, asking the Lord to console and sustain him in this witness of love for the Church, until the end," Francis said, speaking in Italian. One of the latest known photographs of Benedict was taken on Dec. 1, when he met the winners of a prize for theologians named after him. He was seated and looked exceptionally weak.

Taiwan to test arrivals from China for COVID from Jan 1



Macau, the centre added.

◆ India's Hetero said on Tuesday that its generic version of Paxlovid, an antiviral treatment for COVID-19 developed by Pfizer Inc (PFE.N), was added to the World Health Organization's prequalification list, which serves as a benchmark for procurement of medicines by developing countries. Hetero said it had entered into a licensing agreement with the United Nations-backed Medicines Patent Pool (MPP) to manufacture and sell the generic version of the drug in low- and middle-income countries. The treatment bundles two nirmatrelvir pills and one ritonavir pill and will be manufactured at Hetero's plants in India, where the drug has emergency use authorization from the country's drugs controller general. The global health agency has strongly recommended the use of Pfizer's Paxlovid for treating high-risk patients with mild and moderate COVID, while expressing concerns regarding its access in low- and middle-income countries.

India-based Hetero's Paxlovid generic gets WHO backing



CURIOSER & CURIOSER

'Gift of love' Waterford crystals placed on Times Square New Year's Eve ball

Reuters | New York

Nearly 200 new Waterford crystals were installed on the New Year's Eve ball in Times Square in New York on Tuesday in preparation for Saturday's celebration to welcome in 2023.

Since 1999, replacements for the 2,688 crystal panels that make up the ball have been designed and made by hand by Irish craftsmen at Waterford. Each year, a new theme is chosen.

This year's theme was the "Gift of Love," incorporating intertwining love hearts, said Waterford master artisan Tom Brennan at the Times Square site.

"We need this after the pandemic. We've all gone through an horrendous two years. We've come out the other side of it and we've come out better. We surround ourselves with love. We've got everything," he said.

This year, for the first time since before the pandemic, there will be no COVID-related restrictions on visitors willing to brave the cold and crowds of Times Square in midtown-Manhattan to count down the new year and see



A worker stands next to the Waterford Crystal triangles featuring this year's "Gift of Love" design on the Times Square New Year's Eve Ball on the roof of One Times Square in Manhattan, New York City, US



the ball drop on the stroke of midnight.

Iranian chess player appears at Kazan tournament without hijab for second

◆ Law enforcing mandatory hijab wearing have become a flashpoint during Iran protests, when 22-year-old Iranian Kurdish woman Mahsa Amini died

Reuters | Almaty

A n Iranian chess player yesterday took part in an international tournament in Kazakhstan without a hijab for the second day running, according to a Reuters journalist



present.

A Reuters witness at the FIDE World Rapid and Blitz Chess Championships in Almaty, Kazakhstan, saw Sara Khadem competing without a headscarf, a violation of Iran's laws governing female dress code.

Iran has been swept by demonstrations against the country's clerical leadership since mid-September, when 22-year-old Iranian Kurdish woman Mahsa Amini died in the custody of morality police who detained her for "inappropriate attire."

Laws enforcing mandatory hijab were lifted in Iran in 2019. Sara Khadem of Iran sits in front of a chess board

Kim unveils new military goals at key party meeting



North Korean leader Kim Jong Un attends the sixth enlarged meeting of the eighth Central Committee of the Workers' Party in Pyongyang, North Korea

Reuters | Seoul

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un unveiled new goals for the country's military for 2023 at an ongoing meeting of the ruling Workers' Party, state media reported on Wednesday, hinting at another year of intensive weapons tests and tension.

On the second day of the Sixth Enlarged Plenary Meeting of the party's 8th Central Committee, Kim reviewed the "newly created challenging situation" on the Korean peninsula and the broader political landscapes, the report said.

The third-generation leader set the direction for the "anti-enemy struggle" and goals for reinforcing defence power, it added.

"He specified the principles of foreign affairs and the direction of the struggle against the enemy that our party and government must thoroughly abide by in order to protect sovereign rights and defend national interests," the official KCNA news agency said.

"New core goals for strengthening self-defensive capabilities to be strongly pursued in 2023 have been presented in preparation for diverse fluctuations in the political situation." KCNA did not provide details on those goals, but Kim's remarks could indicate the isolated country will continue to accelerate its military buildup.

Tension remained high throughout this year amid

the North's constant weapons tests, and it flared again this week after five North Korean drones crossed into South Korea, prompting Seoul to scramble fighter jets and attack helicopters, and try to shoot them down.

During the plenary meeting, Kim also pointed out "a series of serious shortcomings" observed in such areas as science, education and health this year, and suggested ways to overcome them and raised key tasks for next year, KCNA said. North Korean leaders previously made speeches on New Year Day, but in recent years, Kim has called days-long party gatherings at the end of the year to announce major policy decisions.

Britain urges Iran to stop detaining' dual nationals

Reuters | London

B rritain urged Iran yesterday to stop detaining dual nationals following the arrest of seven people with links to the United Kingdom, saying the practice should not be used to obtain "diplomatic leverage".

Iran's Revolutionary Guards arrested the seven people over anti-government protests as they tried to leave the country on Sunday, according to a statement published by state media. Some of the seven hold dual nationality.

"We are urgently seeking further information from the Iranian authorities on the reports of those British-Iranian dual nationals

BRITISH PRIME MINISTER RISHI SUNAK'S SPOKESPERSON T

nationals."

The reported arrests follow unrest triggered by the Sept. 16 death in detention of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish Iranian who was arrested for wearing "inappropriate attire" under Iran's strict Islamic dress code for women.

The protests have posed one of the biggest challenges to the Shi'ite Muslim-ruled Islamic Republic since the 1979 revolution.

Buffalo, NY, digs out from deadly blizza



A "let's go Buffalo" sign is seen behind an abandoned car on the road following a winter storm. Road crews and residents of western New York state struggled on Tuesday to dig snow still falling and forecasts for rapid warming and rains that could cause flooding. The region in and around Buffalo, New York, downwind of Lake Erie and Lake Ontario, experienced a massive winter storm that extended over most of the United States last week.