

International

Qatar Cabinet approves proposals to allow foreigners own property

Expanded World Cup to generate \$300-400 million windfall

DOHA: Qatar's Cabinet has approved proposals to allow foreigners to own property and be granted residency at the same time, according to an official statement. Non-Qataris would be allowed to fully own property in 10 unspecified areas of the country, said a statement from the Qatar News Agency. "The Cabinet agrees to allow non-Qatari ownership of residential villas within residential complexes and to allow non-Qatari ownership of shops within commercial complexes," said the QNA. The law also covers commercial property.

The government will identify 16 areas in the country where property contracts could be held over a period of 99 years. The Cabinet also agreed on "granting residence to non-Qatari owners of real estate", the QNA reported. Foreign property ownership has been allowed in Qatar previously but under tight regulation. It was also thought to be restricted to one area to the north of the capital Doha.

It is not yet clear when the new law will come into force. The Cabinet said it would hold a press conference next week to give further details. The move comes as gas-rich Qatar seeks further investment in its economy, especially the faltering property sector, as it remains isolated by neighboring former allies in a long-running Gulf diplomatic dispute. Saudi Arabia, the United Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt are among countries who have cut ties in protest at Qatar's "support" for terrorism and Iran. World Cup 2022 host Qatar denies the charges and says its neighbors want regime change in Doha.

\$300-400 million windfall

An expanded 48-team World Cup in 2022 would deliver a financial windfall of up to \$400 million according to an internal feasibility study commissioned by FIFA, a source with knowledge of the document said. The ruling council of football's global governing body meets in Miami this

week with the issue of the 2022 World Cup format in Qatar expected to dominate discussions. FIFA President Gianni Infantino is a notable supporter of increasing the size of the tournament from 32 teams to 48 teams, accelerating an expansion which was first due to take place at the 2026 tournament.

A feasibility study which will be put before the council at this week's meeting in Miami starting on Thursday, is broadly supportive of the expansion in 2022. A source with knowledge of the study told AFP an expanded tournament would boost incomes by between \$300 million and \$400 million (between 265 and 354 million euros), with the extra revenue driven by increased television and marketing rights and ticket sales. The World Cup is by far FIFA's biggest source of income, with last year's tournament in Russia earning a higher-than-forecast \$6.4 billion.

However a 48-team World Cup could only go ahead if games are shared with neighboring

countries, several of whom have imposed a crippling blockade of Qatar since June 2017. The source said five countries could be considered for possible World Cup games—Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Oman and the United Arab Emirates. But Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE would only be candidates if their governments ended the Qatar blockade, according to an excerpt of the feasibility study.

"Due to the geopolitical situation in the region and the recent blockade that Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE have imposed on Qatar, the involvement of such countries in organizing a co-hosted tournament with Qatar would require the lifting of such blockade, in particular the lifting of all restrictions relating to the movement of people and goods between these countries," the feasibility study said. "Ideally, this should be evidenced as a precondition to the appointment of such co-hosts and should cover all aspects to the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022."—Agencies

What to expect from Turkish local elections?

ANKARA: Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) led by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan will be looking to score another victory in local elections on March 31. But the party faces challenges from a more united opposition, a recession and fatigue among voters which experts say could translate into lower turnout. The AKP will likely remain the largest party even if some experts say it could win by a smaller percentage of the vote.

What is at stake?

After parliamentary and presidential elections last year, Erdogan sought to refresh the AKP saying it suffered from "metal fatigue". He exerted his dominance after becoming party chairman again in 2017 by kicking out the mayors of Istanbul and Ankara. The polls this month will be the first municipal elections in which the AKP will field joint candidates with the right-wing Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). The two parties formed the People's Alliance last year before presidential and parliamentary elections, the first time the AKP ran with another party in a formal alliance. There are 30 metropolitan municipalities in Turkey including Ankara, Istanbul and Izmir while there are 51 provincial municipalities. Depending on their municipality, voters will choose city mayors as well as other local posts such as district mayors, members of district assemblies and neighborhood chiefs.

How might economy affect voting?

The elections come at a tricky time for the AKP, which has won many past ballots based on its perceived economic prowess. But the economy is at the forefront of voters' minds with inflation in double-digits and Turkey tumbling into its first recession since 2009 after a currency crisis battered the lira. After expanding 7.4 percent in 2017, GDP growth was 2.6 percent for 2018. With voters already worried whether they can afford staples such as peppers and aubergines, the economic slowdown will leave households further stretched.

GDP per capita fell to \$9,632 in 2018 from over \$10,000 in 2017



ANKARA: People wave flags as they gather to listen to Turkish President and leader of the Turkey's ruling Justice and Development (AK) party Recep Tayyip Erdogan during a party's campaign rally in Ankara's district of Pursaklar. — AFP

while private household consumption dropped 8.9 percent in the fourth quarter of 2018. But experts including Menderes Cinar, professor of political science and international relations at Baskent University, warned the "bad state of the economy" would not necessarily mean the AKP would suffer huge losses. "The AKP may lose some votes because of its mismanagement of the economy, but the magnitude of that loss may not be big enough to consider the elections a loss for the AKP," Cinar said.

Will turnout be an issue?

Key areas where the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) could do well are Ankara and the southern provinces of Adana, Antalya and Mersin as well as Bursa in the northwest, said Berk Esen of Bilkent University. Voter turnout will be key. "These elections are an important chance for voters to show their feelings" about current local authorities, Burak Bilgehan Ozpek, associate professor of international relations at TOBB University said. "There are frustrations with all parties." Yakup Peker, at the Ankara-based TEPAV think-tank, said the AKP or its People's Alliance could lose voters who "might not come out and vote", partly because of a lack of alternatives. —AFP

Indian police arrest 10 for playing PUBG

AHMEDABAD: Indian police have arrested ten university students for playing PUBG, the hugely popular smartphone game described by one minister as a "demon in every house". The arrests occurred Wednesday in western Gujarat state, where local authorities enforced an outright ban on PUBG last week over concerns about its impact on the "behaviour, conduct and language" of those playing it. The students were released on bail later the same day, police inspector VS Vanzara said yesterday.

Another police official, Rohit Raval, told the Indian Express newspaper the game was "highly addictive and the accused were so engrossed in playing" they did not even see police approaching. Gujarat is the only Indian state to ban the game - which has been downloaded more than 100 million times around the world. But concern has been raised in other parts of the country, where close to half a billion people are online and cheap smartphones and data plans are bringing more first-time users into the digital realm.

Parents and educators say the game incites violence and distracts students from their studies. A minister in coastal Goa state described the PUBG as "a demon in every house". Last month, a mother complained to Prime Minister Narendra Modi about her son's addiction to online games during a public interaction and he replied: "Is this the PUBG one?" Often likened to the blockbuster book and film series "The Hunger Games", PUBG is free to download and pits players stranded on islands against one another in a virtual fight to the death.—AFP