

# U.S. Registers Record Daily COVID Death Toll



Healthcare personnel surround a patient who died inside a coronavirus disease (COVID-19) unit at United Memorial Medical Center as the United States nears 300,000 COVID-19 deaths, in Houston, Texas, U.S., December 12, 2020.

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) -- The U.S. registered more COVID-19 deaths in a single day than ever before — nearly 3,900 — on the very day the mob attack on the Capitol laid bare some of the same, deep political divisions that have hampered the battle against the pandemic.

The virus is surging in several states, with California hit particularly hard, reporting on Thursday a record two-day total of 1,042 coronavirus deaths. Skyrocketing caseloads there are threatening to force hospitals to ration care and essentially decide who lives and who dies.

“Folks are gasping for breath. Folks

look like they’re drowning when they are in bed right in front of us,” said Dr. Jeffrey Chien, an emergency room physician at Santa Clara Valley Regional Medical Center, urging people to do their part to help slow the spread. “I’m begging everyone to help us out because we aren’t the front line. We’re the last line.”

Meanwhile, the number of Americans who have gotten their first shot of the COVID-19 vaccine climbed to at least 5.9 million Thursday, a one-day gain of about 600,000, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Hundreds of millions will need to be vaccinated to stop the coronavirus.

About 1.9 million people around the world have died of the virus, more than 360,000 in the U.S. alone. December was by far the nation’s deadliest month yet, and health experts are warning that January could be more terrible still because of family gatherings and travel over the holidays.

A new, more contagious variant is spreading around the globe and in the U.S. Also, it remains to be seen what effect the thousands of supporters of President Donald Trump who converged this week in Washington, many of them without masks, will have on the spread of the scourge.

Trump has long downplayed the virus and scorned masks, and many of his ardent supporters have followed his example. He has also raged against lockdowns and egged on protesters objecting to restrictions in states such as Michigan, where armed supporters invaded the statehouse last spring.

On Wednesday, the day a horde of protesters breached the U.S. Capitol, disrupting efforts to certify the election of Joe Biden, the U.S. recorded 3,865 virus deaths, according to Johns Hopkins University. The numbers can fluctuate dramatically after holidays and weekends, and the figure is subject to revision.

“The domestic terrorists overran the Capitol police, just as the virus has been allowed to overrun Americans,” said Dr. Eric Topol, head of the Scripps Research Translational Institute. “The U.S. lost control of a Trump-incited mob and a Trump-played-down pandemic virus.”

## China: U.S. ‘Playing With Fire’ in Taiwan, Hong Kong



The U.S. Navy Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Stockdale transits the Philippine Sea November 16, 2018.

BEIJING (Dispatches) -- China warned Friday the United States is “playing with fire” by sending yet another official to visit Taiwan, despite repeated calls on Washington to stop such provocative acts.

The U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Kelly Craft, will pay a two-day visit to the self-ruled island next week, the U.S. mission to the UN said on Thursday.

“During her trip, the Ambassador will reinforce the U.S. government’s strong and ongoing support for Taiwan’s international space,” said the mission.

China’s UN mission reacted to the planned visit, warning that “whoever plays with fire will burn himself.”

“The United States will pay a heavy price for its wrong action,” it added.

It called on Washington “to stop its crazy provocation, stop creating new difficulties for China-U.S. relations and the two countries’ cooperation in the United Nations, and stop going further on the wrong path.”

The visit to Taiwan comes even as the island is not a UN member.

Beijing claims sovereignty over self-ruled Taiwan, and under the “One China” policy, almost all world countries recognize that sovereignty.

The island’s defiant president, Tsai Ing-wen, however has long been calling for independence.

Under the administration of President Donald Trump, Washington has constantly supported her and provided her government with weapons over the past years to boost the self-ruled island against Beijing.

The Tsai government signed a 62-billion-dollar deal earlier this year to purchase F-16 fighter jets from the U.S.

The U.S. also regularly conducts provocative maneuvers around the self-governed island, particularly by sailing its warships through the sensitive and strategic Taiwan Strait, which separates Taiwan from mainland China.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said Thursday the U.S. was considering plans to levy sanctions on Chinese state agencies and officials over the arrest of more than 50 anti-government protesters in Hong Kong, including an American citizen.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said Pompeo’s comments represented a serious interference in China’s internal affairs.

“We urge the U.S. to stop interfering in China’s internal affairs, harming China’s interests, and undermining China-U.S. relations,” she said.

“China will take all necessary measures to firmly safeguard its sovereignty and security interests, and the U.S. will pay a heavy price for its wrongdoings,” the Chinese official said.

## News in Brief

SAO PAULO (AP) — A vaccine candidate made by China’s Sinovac is 78% effective in protecting against the coronavirus, according to results of a study announced Thursday by Brazilian state health officials seeking federal approval of the shot. More than 12,000 health workers participated in the study, which detected 218 cases of COVID-19 — about 160 of those among people who received a placebo rather than the actual vaccine. Turkish officials last month said that a smaller, companion study in that country of the same vaccine candidate found an efficacy rate over 90%. The government of Sao Paulo state, which has contracted for the vaccine, said it would ask Brazil’s federal health regulators Friday for emergency approval to begin using it. Gov. João Doria plans to start a vaccination campaign for the state’s 46 million residents on Jan. 25. “Today is the day of hope, the day of life,” Doria said in a news conference. Brazil is nearing 200,000 deaths caused by the virus.

SEOUL (Reuters) -- A South Korean court on Friday ordered Japan to compensate 12 women who were forced to work in its wartime brothels, a ruling that drew a strong rebuke from Tokyo and threatened to rekindle a diplomatic feud between the two countries. Reminders of Japan’s 1910-45 colonial rule of the Korean peninsula are contentious for both sides, with many surviving “comfort women” — a Japanese euphemism for the sex abuse victims — demanding Tokyo’s formal apology and compensation. Japan says the issue was settled under a 1965 treaty that normalized diplomatic ties, and the two countries agreed to “irreversibly” end the dispute in a 2015 deal. But the Seoul Central District Court, a lower tier court, ordered Japan pay each of the women 100 million won (\$91,000), saying neither of the pacts can cover their right to seek compensation. Japan’s Chief Cabinet Secretary Katsunobu Kato called the verdict “unacceptable,” urging Seoul to take “appropriate measures.” Vice Foreign Minister Takeo Akiba summoned South Korean Ambassador Nam Gwan-pyo to lodge an “extremely strong protest.” Some historians estimate up to 200,000 Korean girls and women were forced to provide sex to Japanese troops during the colonial era, sometimes under the pretext of employment or to pay off a relative’s debt.

BERLIN (Reuters) -- German Health Minister Jens Spahn is considering putting himself forward to stand as chancellor for Angela Merkel’s conservative bloc in a September federal election, top-selling Bild daily reported on Friday. Merkel has said she will not run for a fifth term in the election and her Christian Democrats (CDU) is to pick a new leader next week. The winner would be a favorite to stand as chancellor but someone else could stand, not least because the CDU’s Bavarian sister party has to back the candidate. Citing party sources, Bild said Spahn, who has been in the spotlight during the coronavirus pandemic, had discussed his future role with various influential CDU politicians in the last few weeks. A chairman of a CDU state association told the paper that Spahn was “very openly thinking about running and is saying so quite clearly in talks.” In addition, a CDU state parliamentary party leader told Bild: “Jens Spahn has made it clear to me that he is open to running for chancellor if his poll ratings in March are much better than (Armin) Laschet’s.”

JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — A convicted firebrand cleric who inspired the Bali bombers and other violent extremists walked free from an Indonesian prison Friday after completing his sentence for funding the training of militants. Police said they would continue to monitor the activities of Abu Bakar Bashir, who is now 82 and ailing, and his son said Bashir for now would be avoiding activities outside his family due to the coronavirus pandemic. Bashir was imprisoned in 2011 for his links to a militant training camp in the religiously conservative Aceh province. He was convicted of funding the military-style camp to train militants and sentenced to 15 years in jail. Bashir has accumulated 55 months of sentence reductions, which are often granted to prisoners on major holidays, such as Independence Day, religious holiday exemptions and illness, said Rika Aprianti, the spokesperson for the corrections department at the Justice Ministry.

CANBERRA, Australia (AP) — Australia sweltered through its fourth-hottest year on record last year despite the recent return of the usually cooling La Nina climate pattern, the nation’s weather bureau said on Friday. The wetter-than-average 2020 followed Australia’s hottest and driest year in 2019 that came to a catastrophic conclusion with wildfires fueled by drought that killed at least 33 people, destroyed more than 3,000 homes and razed 19 million hectares (47 million acres). Globally, 2020 is likely to be recognized as the world’s third-hottest on record once climate data for December is calculated, Bureau of Meteorology head of climate operations Andrew Watkins said. La Nina, the cooler flipside of the better known El Nino, was declared in the Pacific Ocean in September. La Nina occurs when equatorial trade winds become stronger, changing ocean surface currents and drawing up cooler deep water.

## Kim Exploring Ways to Renew Inter-Korean Talks



North Korean leader Kim Jong Un speaks during the 8th Congress of the Workers’ Party in Pyongyang, North Korea, in this photo supplied by North Korea’s Central News Agency (KCNA) on January 8, 2021.

SEOUL (Dispatches) -- North Korean leader Kim Jong Un explored ways to renew inter-Korean ties and vowed to expand diplomatic relations, state media said on Friday, as he hosted a rare party congress less than two weeks before U.S. President-elect Joe Biden takes office.

The eighth congress of the ruling Workers’ Party came amid a prolonged gridlock in negotiations on North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs in return for U.S. sanction relief.

On its third day on Thursday, Kim raised the issue of reshaping South Korean affairs “as required by the prevailing situation and the changed

times” and discussed foreign policy, the official KCNA news agency reported, without elaborating.

He “declared the general orientation and the policy stand of our party for comprehensively expanding and developing the external relations,” KCNA said.

Biden will come into office facing the thorny task of engineering a breakthrough in the stalemate, after a second summit between Kim and outgoing U.S. President Donald Trump in 2019 failed to reach agreement.

Yang Moo-jin, a professor at the University of North Korean Studies in Seoul, said Kim was likely seeking to play a more proactive role in South

Korea and U.S. ties, emboldened by his country’s elevated standing after successful intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) tests in 2017 and summits with Trump.

“He appears to be gauging how to set relations with the Biden administration based on what they see as a self-defensive nuclear deterrent,” Yang said.

North Korea has continued to beef up its weapons programs, unveiling what was deemed its largest ICBM yet at a parade in October.

Kim on Wednesday vowed to boost military capabilities to a “much higher level.”

Inter-Korean relations made some headway around 2018 summits but have soured as the nuclear talks stalled.

An official at Seoul’s Unification Ministry said it was the first time North Korea used the phrase “South Korea affairs,” which it would usually refer to by “North-South relations,” and the government is closely monitoring developments.

Some observers say North Korea is frustrated because Seoul has failed to break away from Washington and revive stalled joint economic projects held back by the U.S.-led sanctions. They also speculate North Korea initially thought South Korea would help it win sanctions relief but got upset after Kim returned home empty-handed from the 2019 summit with Trump.

## French Airstrike Kills People Attending Wedding in Mali



A French soldier stands guard in an armored vehicle in northern Mali in March 2013.

BAMAKO (Dispatches) -- A French military drone strike in Mali has reportedly killed civilians attending a wedding event in a remote village amid France’s persisting military intervention in its former African colony under the pretext of fighting rising militancy in the impoverished — though minerals-rich — nation.

The aerial strike in central Mali’s isolated Douentza area came at a moment of growing anti-French sentiment and armed resistance across the West African country in response to the eight-year military presence of the former colonial power.

An advocacy group for Fulani herders, known as Jeunesse Tabital Pulaaku, released a list on Thursday of 19 people it said were killed by the French airstrike, including the father of the groom, as well as seven others it said were injured in the attack while attending the wedding ceremony.

“Those who were killed were civilians,” said the group’s president, Hamadou Dicko, as quoted in a Reuters report on Friday.

The report further cited a health worker, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, as confirming that civilians had been “mistakenly hit in the strike.”

This is while Mali’s Paris-backed government and the French military

denied on Thursday eye-witness accounts and other reports blaming the French airstrike for the civilian fatalities, claiming that only Muslim militants were targeted.

The French army further insisted that the targets were “Islamist fighters,” claiming that their identities were confirmed by its drones prior to the bloody attack and subsequent checks following the strike.

“No collateral damage, no sign of a festive gathering or a marriage,” the French army command declared in a statement, describing the targeted site as lightly wooded and claiming that “no women or children were observed” in the area.

According to the army statement, a group of nearly 40 men was monitored by the REAPER drone for more than an hour and a half before the strike, which was carried out over one kilometer from the nearest dwellings on the edge of the village of Bounti.

Repeating the French version of events, Mali’s Defense Ministry further cited surveillance images “to state that “the strike took place during a joint operation with French forces and killed about 30 militants.”

“There was no sign of a marriage, women or children,” it added in a statement.

## ‘Innocent Man’ to Remain in Jail After 35 Years Behind Bars

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — A man who has spent 35 years in prison in a murder case featured in the book and television series “The Innocent Man” must remain incarcerated even after a judge ordered his release, an appeals court ruled Thursday.

The Court of Criminal Appeals ordered Tommy Ward, 60, to remain imprisoned while the state appeals the lower court’s ruling that he be released.

Ward and a co-defendant, Karl Fontenot, were convicted and sentenced to life in prison in the 1984 kidnapping and killing of Donna Denise Haraway, a convenience store clerk in Ada, Oklahoma.

But a Pontotoc County district judge ruled last month that prosecutors withheld key evidence in the case, including witness interviews and police reports, and ordered Ward’s release.

“The Pontotoc County District Attorney’s office relied solely on investigators to provide it with the evidence needed to prosecute the case without questioning whether the investigators had turned over all exculpatory and/or impeachment evidence,” Judge Paula Inge wrote in her December order. “The investigators seem to have taken on the role of prosecutor, judge and jury, determining that the only “relevant” evidence was evidence that fit their theory of the case.”

The Oklahoma attorney general’s office, which appealed

Inge’s order, declined to comment on Thursday’s ruling.

“I’m still holding out hope that the attorney general of Oklahoma will change course here, take a close look at the case,” said Greg Swygert, one of Ward’s attorneys. “When you read their briefs, they don’t take issue with the fact that this information was withheld from him. They can’t. It’s clear as day.”

Fontenot, Ward’s co-defendant, was ordered released by a federal judge in 2019, and the state is also appealing that order.

The convictions of Ward and Fontenot have come under intense scrutiny for years and have been the subject of numerous books, including John Grisham’s “The Innocent Man,” which he produced into a six-part documentary.

The convictions were based almost entirely on accounts they said they retrieved from dreams that “dream confessions” came after hours of interrogation by Ada police and state agents desperate to solve the disappearance of Haraway in 1984, just two years after the unsolved rape and murder of another young woman in the small central Oklahoma town.

After the details of both men’s confessions were proven untrue — Haraway’s body was discovered years later in a different location and had been shot to death not stabbed as the pair had said — a state appeals court ordered new trials. Local prosecutors again secured their convictions, based largely on their confessions.