

# Biden: U.S. COVID Deaths Set to Surpass 600,000



U.S. President Joe Biden signs executive orders in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington, January 20, 2021.

WASHINGTON (AFP) -- President Joe Biden warned that the number of coronavirus deaths in the United States was expected to surpass 600,000 and urged Congress to move fast on his \$1.9 trillion plan to battle Covid-19 and provide economic relief to struggling Americans.

While Biden called for urgent passage of his "American Rescue Plan", his efforts to get Congress to cooperate on his fast-paced agenda could be complicated by Donald Trump's looming impeachment trial in the Senate.

"The virus is surging," Biden told reporters at the White House before

he said.

Biden is pushing Congress for funding while simultaneously getting his government confirmed - Pentagon chief Lloyd Austin won Senate approval Friday - and bracing for turmoil from the impeachment trial.

Trump was impeached by the House on January 13 for inciting supporters to storm Congress a week earlier.

Top Democratic lawmakers said Friday that they planned to send the article of impeachment passed by the House of Representatives to the Senate on Monday, a move that ordinarily would have triggered the beginning of the trial within a day.

Although Biden's latest executive orders on food aid and stimulus payments were modest in scale, they reinforced the message that Washington needs to step in decisively against the pandemic and related economic fallout.

Biden's \$1.9 trillion plan provides more than \$400 billion to tackle the pandemic along with additional funding for small businesses and direct relief payments to Americans.

But Congress, having already passed two huge economic relief bills, is reluctant. The president's Democratic Party has only a small majority in the House and a razor-thin advantage in the Senate.

signing executive orders boosting food aid and speeding up stimulus payments to Americans.

"We're at 400,000 dead, expected to reach well over 600,000. Families are going hungry. People are at risk of being evicted. Job losses are mounting again. We need to act now ... We need to move fast."

Biden added that he was looking forward to working with both parties in Congress to "move quickly" on getting people help through his plan.

"The bottom line is this: We're in a national emergency. We've got to act like we're in a national emergency,"

## Muslim Groups Blast Macron's Anti-Islamic 'Charter'



A French police officer stands guard in front of the entrance of the Paris Grand Mosque, Paris, France, Jan. 14, 2015.

PARIS (Dispatches) -- Three major Muslim organizations in France have censured the government's "charter of principles" of Islam, insisting that the document will likely undermine "the honor of Muslims."

President Emmanuel Macron wants French Muslim groups to sign up to the charter, saying he seeks to secure France's secular system in the wake of a spate of attacks blamed on extremists in 2020.

But the three groups which make up the nine-member French Council of the Muslim Faith (CFCM) said, "We believe that certain passages and formulations in the text submitted are likely to weaken the bonds of trust between the Muslims of France and the nation."

"Furthermore, some statements are prejudicial to the honor of Muslims, with an accusatory and marginalizing tone," they added in a Friday statement, referring to the text of the so-called anti-extremism charter.

Macron has enraged Muslims worldwide by publicly supporting publication of a derogatory image of Islam's Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon Him) and describing the Abrahamic faith of nearly 1.8 billion people as a "religion in crisis."

"We obviously agree with the demand for non-interference by States, the non-instrumentalization of religions and respect for the Constitution and the principles of the Republic," the joint statement said.

The development came days after dozens of civil society organizations called on the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) to open formal infringement procedures against the French government for entrenching Islamophobia.

In a complaint to the UNHRC, nearly 36 groups from 13 countries outlined the "clear violation of a number of basic rights that are protected in legislation that is ratified by Paris."

"France has seen shocking levels of state-sanctioned Islamophobia in recent months. This has precipitated the closure of mosques, Muslim schools, Muslim-led charities and civil society organizations," said Muhammad Rabbani, managing director of Cage, which co-signed the complaint.

The approval of Macron's charter dictating how Muslims in France should practice their faith would pave the way for the establishment of a so-called national council of imams that would have powers to authorize and shape the practices of imams across the French Muslim communities.

The council will also control and restrict the entry of imams from Turkey, Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria, according to reports published by France's mainstream media outlets which said under the plan 300 imams may be expelled.

## News in Brief

TAIPEI (Reuters) -- Eight Chinese bomber planes and four fighter jets entered the southwestern corner of Taiwan's air defense identification zone on Saturday, and Taiwan's air force deployed missiles to "monitor" the incursion, the island's Defense Ministry said. China, which claims Taiwan as its own territory, has conducted almost daily flights over the waters between the southern part of Taiwan and the Taiwan-controlled Pratas Islands in the South China Sea in recent months. However they have generally consisted of just one or two reconnaissance aircraft. The presence of so many Chinese combat aircraft on this mission - Taiwan said it was made up of eight nuclear-capable H-6K bombers and four J-16 fighter jets - is unusual. Beijing has watched with growing concern increasing U.S. support for Taiwan, especially during Donald Trump's administration which left office on Wednesday.

WASHINGTON (Reuters) -- The leaders of the U.S. Senate agreed to push back former President Donald Trump's impeachment trial by two weeks, giving the chamber more time to focus on President Joe Biden's legislative agenda and Cabinet nominees before turning to the contentious showdown over Trump. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, a Democrat, said the trial is set to begin during the week of Monday Feb. 8, an arrangement praised by the chamber's top Republican, Mitch McConnell. The House of Representatives is due to formally deliver to the Senate on Monday the impeachment charge accusing Trump of inciting an insurrection, a move that ordinarily would have triggered the beginning of the trial within a day. The charge stems from Trump's incendiary speech to supporters before they stormed the Capitol on Jan. 6 in a rampage that delayed the formal congressional certification of Biden's election victory and left five people dead, including a police officer.

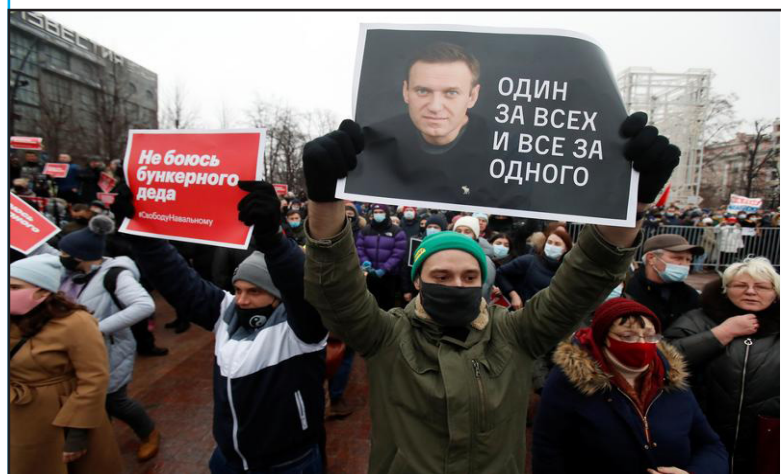
TORONTO (Reuters) -- Canada deported thousands of people even as COVID-19 raged last year, data seen by Reuters shows, and lawyers say deportations are ramping up, putting people needlessly at risk in the midst of a global health emergency. Lawyers and human rights advocates are decrying Canada's November decision to resume deportations. Until now, the extent of the country's pandemic deportations was not known, but recent interviews with immigration lawyers and scrutiny of government numbers has shed light on the situation. Canada counted 12,122 people as removed in 2020 - 875 more than the previous year and the highest number since at least 2015, according to Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) data seen by Reuters. The government says this was necessary and done safely.

ATHENS (Reuters) -- Greece's foreign minister said he hoped Turkey would have a positive approach towards a meeting next week aimed at reviving long-stalled efforts to open negotiations over disputed territorial claims. The neighboring countries held 60 rounds of talks between 2002 and 2016, but plans last year for discussions to be resumed foundered over a survey vessel sent by Ankara into disputed waters and disagreements over the topics to be covered. "The only sure thing is the positive approach of Athens. I hope the Turkish side will come to these talks in the same spirit," Nikos Dendias told the Efimerida Ton Syntakton newspaper in an interview. He said the exploratory talks, which were halted in March 2016, were not negotiations but aimed to discover whether there was enough convergence for possible future negotiations on just one specific issue.

LOS ANGELES (AFP) -- Larry King, the suspenders-sporting everyman whose broadcast interviews with world leaders, movie stars and ordinary Joes helped define American conversation for a half-century, died Saturday. He was 87. King died at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles, Ora Media, the studio and network he co-founded, tweeted. No cause of death was given, but CNN had earlier reported he was hospitalized with COVID-19. A long-time nationally syndicated radio host, from 1985 through 2010 he was a nightly fixture on CNN, where he won many honors, including two Peabody awards. King conducted an estimated 50,000 on-air interviews. In 1995 he presided over a Middle East peace summit with PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat, King Hussein of Jordan and Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin.

WASHINGTON (Reuters) -- Between 150 and 200 National Guard troops deployed to Washington, D.C., to provide security for President Joe Biden's inauguration have tested positive for the coronavirus, a U.S. official said on Friday. The U.S. government imposed unprecedented security measures in the city following the deadly Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol by supporters of former President Donald Trump, including fences topped with razor wire and checkpoints manned by National Guard. The official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said the number of National Guard troops who tested positive could rise but was still a small fraction of the more than 25,000 troops deployed in the city over the past few days. The United States reported more than 4,000 daily deaths from COVID-19 for a second consecutive day on Thursday, according to a Reuters analysis of public health data, bringing the cumulative number of U.S. lives lost to almost 410,000.

## Russian Police Confront Protesters Exhorted by U.S.



A participant holds a placard during a rally in support of Western-backed blogger Alexei Navalny in Moscow, January 23, 2021.

MOSCOW (Dispatches) -- Police detained over 1,000 people across Russia on Saturday after a group of people held illegal protests to demand the release of Western-backed blogger Alexei Navalny.

Navalny had called for protest after being arrested last weekend as he returned to Russia from Germany for the first time since being allegedly poisoned with a nerve agent.

The authorities had warned people to stay away from Saturday's protests, saying they risked catching COVID-19 as well as prosecution and possible jail time for attending an unauthorized event.

Navalny, a 44-year-old lawyer,

is in a Moscow prison pending the outcome of four legal matters.

On Friday, Moscow warned the U.S. embassy against encouraging unauthorized rallies in support of Navalny, saying the move will be regarded as "gross interference" in the country's internal affairs.

The Russian Foreign Ministry raised the alarm on its Telegram channel after the American embassy called on U.S. nationals to avoid unauthorized demonstrations in Navalny's support due to likely substantial police presence.

The U.S. diplomatic mission also listed in detail the place and timing of the demonstrations in various cit-

ies across the country.

"All that coincides with Washington's provocative doctrinal guidelines to encourage 'protests in the countries with unwanted governments', any attempts of this 'coverage' of unauthorized rallies will be regarded as gross interference in our country's domestic affairs and will lead to a corresponding response," the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

The ministry underlined that the information, posted on the U.S. embassy's site, on the time and venues for the unsanctioned rallies goes beyond concern for U.S. nationals in Russia.

Russian police detained Navalny on arrival at Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport from Germany last weekend, five months after he was transferred to a hospital in Berlin to be treated for what the West alleged had been a nerve agent attack by Moscow.

Russia denied the allegation, describing it as a provocation of Western intelligence services aimed at justifying more sanctions against Russia.

Germany has rejected a request by Russian prosecutors to provide Navalny's medical records for a comparative study of his condition.

Navalny, who was arrested for violating the terms of a suspended sentence he initially received in 2014, is set to remain behind bars until mid-February, awaiting trial.

## UK Chief Scientist: New COVID Variant More Deadly



Health care workers transport a patient at the Royal London Hospital, as the spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) continues, in London, January 19, 2021.

LONDON (AP) -- There is some evidence that a new coronavirus variant first identified in southeast England carries a higher risk of death than the original strain, the British government's chief scientific adviser said -- though he stressed that the data is uncertain.

Patrick Vallance told a news conference that "there is evidence that there is an increased risk for those who have the new variant."

He said that for a man in his 60s with the original version of the virus, "the average risk is that for 1,000 people who got infected, roughly 10 would be expected to unfortunately die."

"With the new variant, for 1,000 people infected, roughly 13 or 14 people might be expected to die," he said.

But Vallance stressed that "the evidence is not yet strong" and more research is needed.

In contrast to that uncertainty, he said, there is growing confidence that the variant is more easily passed on than the original coronavirus strain. He said it appears to be between 30% and 70% more transmissible.

Maria Van Kerkhove, the World Health Organization's technical lead on COVID-19, said studies were underway to look at the transmission and severity of new virus variants.

She said so far "they haven't seen an in-

crease in severity" but that more transmission could lead to "an overburdened health care system" and thus more deaths.

The evidence for the new variant being more deadly is in a paper prepared by a group of scientists that advises the government on new respiratory viruses, based on several studies.

The British scientists said that although initial analyses suggested that the strain, first identified in September, did not cause more severe disease, several more recent ones suggest it might. However, the numbers of deaths are relatively small, and case fatality rates are affected by many things including the care patients get and their age and health beyond having COVID-19.

The British scientists stress that the information so far has major limitations, and that they do not know how representative the cases included in the analyses are of what's happening throughout the country or elsewhere.

One analysis did not find an increased risk of death among people admitted to a hospital with the new strain. In another, the odds of being admitted to a hospital with the new strain compared to the previously dominant one were no different.

There is a lag in reporting hospitalizations after infection, and a further lag from infection to death, so officials expect to learn more in several weeks.

## Tens of Thousands Rally in Karachi Against Zionist Ties

KARACHI (Dispatches) -- Tens of thousands of Pakistanis have held a march in the country's major city of Karachi, rejecting the possibility of normalizing ties with the occupying regime of Israel.

The "million-man march", organized by opposition Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F), was held with participants donning the colors of the JUI-F and raising tall black and white striped flags.

"Israel is involved in the genocide of Muslims in Palestine and we would never allow the federal government to establish diplomatic relations with it," JUI-F leader Maulana Saleemullah Alwazi told Pakistani daily the News International.

In recent months, the news of deals signed by a few Arab dictatorships to normalize diplomatic relations with the Zionist regime under intense U.S. pressure has sparked widespread anger among Pakistani people, who hold strong feelings for the Palestinian cause.

In December, top Pakistani officials fiercely denied rumors publicized by Israeli news outlets that Islamabad was mov-

ing towards a similar deal.

Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan rejected as "baseless" reports of his government officials visiting Occupied Palestine, insisting why would any of his ministers visit Tel Aviv when Islamabad does not even recognize Israel.

Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi said later he had informed the UAE -- one of the U.S.-backed regimes that recently normalized ties with Israel -- of Islamabad's "steadfast" policy towards Tel Aviv, insisting that the country will refuse to recognize it until the issue of Palestine is resolved.

The top Pakistani diplomat said he had explained to his Emirati counterpart Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan the "depth of emotions and feelings Pakistanis have about Palestine and Kashmir."

The normalization trend has drawn widespread condemnation from Palestinians, who seek an independent state in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip, with East Jerusalem Al-Quds as its capital. They say the normalization deals are "a stab in the back" of the Palestinians.