

# S Africa hits 1m cases

Detects new Covid variant; Trump signs virus relief and spending package

AFP, Johannesburg

South Africa logged its millionth case of Covid-19 and South Korea yesterday became the latest country to detect the new coronavirus variant, as the pandemic showed no signs of letting up.

Global infections have raced past 80 million with nearly 1.8 million deaths, even as vaccination drives gather pace in North America and Europe, with a top US expert warning that the pandemic might get even worse in the coming weeks.

The explosion of cases worldwide in recent weeks has prompted the return of many unpopular restrictions, including some lockdowns, and concerns have grown after the detection of a new virus variant experts believe could be more transmissible.

South Africa became the first African nation to log one million cases, official data showed Sunday, as authorities considered reimposing restrictions to battle a second wave of infections driven by the new variant.

South Korea became the latest nation yesterday to detect the variant, in three individuals of a London-based family who arrived in the country last week.

The new variant was first detected in

Britain, and made its way to a number of other nations including Japan and Canada, prompting dozens of governments -- including European nations -- to impose travel restrictions on the UK.

Most European countries began their vaccination campaigns over the weekend, boosting hopes of an end to the pandemic, especially in some of the hardest-hit parts of the continent.

US cases have been surging at an alarming rate in recent months. The world's largest economy has added at least one million new cases per week since early November, according to Johns Hopkins University data.

But there was some relief for Americans Sunday when President Donald Trump finally signed a \$900 billion stimulus bill, a long-awaited boost for millions of people whose livelihoods have been battered by the pandemic.

While the United States has also begun vaccinations, experts have said that because of the expected surge in cases over the Christmas holidays, the situation could get much worse.

Top US government scientist Anthony Fauci warned Sunday that the worst of the pandemic may be yet to come, driving the United States to a "critical point" as holiday travel spreads the coronavirus.



Farmers burn posters of the Reliance Jio telecommunications company as they protest against corporate businesses during a demonstration against the central government's recent agricultural reforms, on the outskirts of Amritsar, India yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

## KILLING OF LABOURERS IN KASHMIR

# Indian cops charge army officer, civilian

REUTERS, Srinagar

Indian police in Kashmir filed charges against an army officer and a civilian for allegedly killing three labourers and planting weapons to pass them off as militants, in a rare indictment of the military fighting an insurgency in the region.

The three labourers were killed in July after what the Indian army had initially said was a gun battle that started after militants fired at security forces in Amshipora village in southern Kashmir.

But Kashmir police, who come under the direct control of the central government in New Delhi, said in a press release on Sunday that their investigation showed the labourers "were murdered" by an army captain and two civilians - one of whom turned state's evidence.

"They planted illegally acquired weapons and material on their dead bodies after stripping them of their identities," police said, adding that the accused had "deliberately and purposefully" chosen not to follow standard operating procedures.

The Indian army declined to comment on the police statement on Sunday. In an update last week, an army spokesman said that it was progressing with its own investigation, adding that the army was "committed to ethical conduct of operations."

Rights groups have long accused the Indian army of violating human rights in Kashmir, a Muslim majority region that is claimed in full by both India and Pakistan, but ruled in part by both.

# Weather disasters cost \$150b in 2020

Says report, reveals long-term impact of global warming

AFP, Paris

The ten costliest weather disasters worldwide this year saw insured damages worth \$150 billion, topping the figure for 2019 and reflecting a long-term impact of global warming, according to a report yesterday.

The same disasters claimed at least 3,500 lives and displaced more than 13.5 million people.

From Australia's out-of-control wildfires in January to a record number of Atlantic hurricanes through November, the true cost of the year's climate-enhanced calamities was in fact far higher because most losses were uninsured.

Not surprisingly, the burden fell disproportionately on poor nations, according to the annual tally from global NGO Christian Aid, entitled "Count the cost of 2020: a year of climate breakdown."

Only four percent of economic losses from climate-impacted extreme

events in low-income countries were insured, compared with 60 percent in high-income economies, the report said, citing a study last month in The Lancet.



"Whether floods in Asia, locusts in Africa, or storms in Europe and the Americas, climate change has continued to rage in 2020," said Christian Aid's climate policy lead, Kat Kramer.

Extreme weather disasters, of course, have plagued humanity long

before manmade global warming began to mess with the planet's climate system.

But more than a century of temperature and precipitation data, along with decades of satellite data on hurricanes and sea level rise, have left no doubt that Earth's warming surface temperature is amplifying their impact.

Massive tropical storms -- variously known as hurricanes, typhoons and cyclones -- are now more likely, for example, to be stronger, last longer, carry more water and wander beyond their historical range.

2020's record-breaking 30 named Atlantic hurricanes -- with at least 400 fatalities and \$41 billion in damages -- suggest the world could see more such storms as well.

The World Meteorological Organization (WMO) had to use Greek symbols after running out of letters in the Latin alphabet.

## NEWS IN BRIEF

### Saudi activist jailed for 5 years, 8 months

A Saudi court yesterday sentenced prominent activist Loujain al-Hathloul to five years and eight months in prison for terrorism-related crimes, according to local media allowed to attend her trial. The women's rights activist was convicted of "various activities prohibited by the anti-terrorism law", the pro-government online outlet Sabq and other media cited the court as saying. It added that the court suspended two years and 10 months of the sentence. United Nations human rights experts have called the charges against her spurious, and along with leading rights groups and lawmakers in the United States and Europe have called for her release. Rights groups and her family say Hathloul, who had championed women's right to drive and for ending the kingdom's male guardian system, was subjected to abuse, including electric shocks, waterboarding, flogging and sexual assault.



### Pfizer delays vaccine deliveries to 8 EU nations

Pfizer has postponed the delivery of new batches of its coronavirus vaccine to eight European nations including Spain, the Spanish health ministry said yesterday, a day after the EU began its immunisation campaign. The Spanish branch of Pfizer informed Madrid on Sunday night of the delay in shipments to the eight nations due to a "problem in the loading and shipment process" at its plant in Belgium, the health ministry said in a statement. It did not specify which European nations aside from Spain were affected. Pfizer has informed the ministry that the problem "was already resolved" but the next delivery of vaccines "will be a few hours late" and arrive in Spain on Tuesday, a day later than expected, the statement said.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS



Protesters take part in a torch rally after the parliament was dissolved and general elections were announced to be held in April and May, more than a year ahead of schedule, in Kathmandu, Nepal yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

# EU member states endorse post-Brexit trade deal

AFP, Brussels

The 27 EU member states yesterday gave the green light for the post-Brexit trade deal to go into effect on January 1, a spokesman said.

Ambassadors from EU capitals met in Brussels to nod through the accord, using a procedure which will take effect at 3:00 pm (1400 GMT) today.

This will provisionally allow tariff-free trade with Britain to continue after it leaves the EU single market at the New Year.

Sebastian Fischer, spokesman for the German presidency of the EU, said: "EU Ambassadors have unanimously approved the provisional application of the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement."

The member states' adoption of the plan allows it to come into effect in time to head off disruption

of cross-Channel trade.

But the deal must still be ratified retrospectively by the European Parliament, probably in late February.

Meanwhile, Britain's cabinet office minister Michael Gove said yesterday most British businesses have made preparations for the end of the Brexit transition period, adding it was important they were ready for changes to trading and regulatory rules.

Asked if businesses were ready for the end of the transition period on December 31, when Britain finally leaves the European Union's customs union and single market, Gove said: "Yes. The overwhelming majority of businesses have been getting ready, absolutely."

## China trial of 'Hong Kong 12' begins

US urges release of the dissidents

AFP, Shenzhen

The trial in China of a group of Hong Kong pro-democracy activists who tried to escape the city by speedboat for sanctuary in Taiwan opened yesterday, as the United States urged the immediate release of dissidents it says "fled tyranny".

Ten of the so-called "Hong Kong 12" were in court in the southern city of Shenzhen facing charges linked to an illegal border crossing.

Chinese authorities took them into custody after their boat was intercepted on August 23.

The hearing began as scheduled yesterday afternoon, AFP understands, and was likely to run into the evening.

But court officials would confirm nothing about the case and the trial -- like many in China's opaque legal system -- was not open to foreign reporters or diplomats.

## CLASHES BETWEEN TURKISH-LED TSNA, SDF

# 9,500 flee homes in northeast Syria

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

At least 9,500 people have fled their homes in Ain Issa, northeast Syria, following an escalation in clashes between the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (TSNA) and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in mid-December.

The SDF -- the military forces of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), also known as Rojava -- who control Ain Issa, report daily shelling on the city from Turkish-backed forces for the past week. The sound of fighting could be heard from sunset until Sunday noon.

Ain Issa sits approximately 45km (28 miles) by road from Tel Abyad, a city flanking the Turkish border and captured in October 2019 during Ankara's Operation Peace Spring.

Operation Peace Spring was launched following the abrupt withdrawal of United States troops from Syria to secure a so-called safe-zone on Turkey's border by clearing the region of People's Protection Units (YPG) fighters.

The SDF is comprised of the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), which Turkey considers to be linked to the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

Labelled a "terrorist" organisation by Turkey, the US and the European Union, the PKK has waged an armed uprising against the Turkish state since the 1980s.

The Turkish government stated the safe-zone would span 32km (20 miles) deep from the Turkish border into Syria and 444km (276 miles) wide from the Euphrates River to Iraq in order to settle up to two million Syrian refugees currently hosted by Turkey.

The operation resulted in Turkey capturing the cities of Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain near its border and controlling an area 20km deep into Syria.

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