



Thousands of US flags are seen at the National Mall, to represent the people who are unable to travel to Washington for the inauguration, near the US Capitol ahead of President-elect Joe Biden's inauguration, in Washington, US, on Monday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

No indication of insider threat

Says acting Pentagon chief ahead of Biden's inauguration; FBI says Capitol rioter allegedly hoped to sell Pelosi laptop to Russia

AGENCIES

The acting Pentagon chief said on Monday the FBI is assisting the US military in vetting more than 25,000 National Guard troops being deployed to assist in protecting the US Capitol around President-elect Joe Biden's inauguration for potential security concerns.

After the Jan 6 Capitol assault by supporters of Donald Trump that resulted in five deaths and sent lawmakers into hiding, the US government has imposed unprecedented security surrounding the Capitol, including non-scalable fences rimmed with razor wire and a large security zone that the public is barred from.

Acting Secretary of Defense Christopher Miller said in a statement on Monday the vetting is "normal for military support to large security events... While we have no intelligence indicating an insider threat, we are

leaving no stone unturned in securing the capital."

The Washington Post reported Monday the FBI in an intelligence report warned law enforcement agencies that far-right extremists had discussed posing as National Guard members in Washington.

US POWER TRANSITION

The US Army said on Tuesday it is working with the FBI to see if any attackers were current service members and with the Secret Service to see if any of the nearly 10,000 National Guard troops securing Biden's inauguration would need additional screening.

Asked why authorities were looking into the background of every National Guard member called in to help secure the area around the swearing in ceremony, Acting Department of Homeland Security Secretary Peter

Gaynor said on Monday, "The FBI and others decided this would be a prudent move."

Meanwhile, a young woman identified as having taken part in the storming of the US Capitol reportedly stole a laptop from top Democrat Nancy Pelosi's office and hoped to sell it to a Russian spy agency, according to an FBI criminal complaint.

The complaint, filed late Sunday in a US District Court in Washington, seeks the arrest of Riley June Williams of Pennsylvania on grounds including "violent entry and disorderly conduct on Capitol grounds." The Washington Post reported Monday night that federal authorities said they had arrested Williams.

A witness, identified in the court document only as W1 but who claimed to be "the former romantic partner of Williams," alleged that Williams planned to send the laptop to a friend in Russia to sell it to the SVR foreign intelligence agency.

Biden's popularity on the rise: survey

Trump leaves office with lowest approval rating of his presidency

AGENCIES

US President-elect Joe Biden will take office today with high expectations and largely positive reviews of how he has handled the transition, according to a new CNN Poll conducted by SSRS. But those rosy assessments of Biden come as negative perceptions of how things are going in the United States are at the highest level since 2009.

Biden will take office with a store of goodwill in his corner: Two-thirds of Americans approve (66%) of the way Biden is handling the presidential transition, and his favorability rating has climbed 7 points compared with a pre-election poll in October (59% view him favorably now, compared to 52% then).

Trump will leave the White House with the lowest approval rating of his presidency, with just 34 percent of Americans supporting the job he has done, a Gallup poll showed Monday.

Gallup noted that Trump's average approval rating during his one-term presidency was 41 percent, four points lower than any of his predecessors since the polling group has been gathering data.

Trump's job approval had dipped to 35 percent in previous polls, most notably after he failing to condemn a violent gathering of white supremacists in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017.

Once Biden is sworn in and the results of Georgia's Senate runoff are certified, the Democrats will control the presidency, the House and the Senate. Most Americans say single-party control will be good for the country (53%), more than those that said the same about Republican control of the presidency and Congress following the 2016 election (49%), but fewer than those that felt that way about Democratic control after 2008 (59%).



Be passionate, but not violent
Says Melania Trump in farewell message

AFP, Washington

First Lady Melania Trump released a farewell message Monday as she prepares to leave the White House, saying that "violence is never the answer," weeks after the president's supporters stormed the US Capitol.

In a formal, six-minute speech recorded on video, she made only a fleeting reference to her husband as she paid tribute to military families, pandemic health workers and those helping victims of opioid abuse.

"The past four years have been unforgettable," the First Lady said. "As Donald and I conclude our time in the White House, I think of all of the people I have taken home in my heart and their incredible stories of love, patriotism and determination."

"Be passionate in everything you do. But always remember that violence is never the answer, and will never be justified," she said.

"When I came to the White House, I reflected on the responsibility I have always felt as a mother to encourage, give strength and teach values of kindness."

The Trumps' departure has been fractious, with the president refusing for months to accept the election result due to false allegations of fraud, and declining to congratulate his successor Joe Biden.

The outgoing president and his wife have also not invited Biden and his wife Jill for the traditional tea visit in the Oval Office, and will not attend Biden's presidential inauguration on Wednesday.

President Donald Trump has been largely out of the public eye since his supporters rampaged through Congress on January 6, triggering his historic second impeachment a week later.

Biden to propose 8-year citizenship path for immigrants

AP, Washington

US President-elect Joe Biden plans to unveil a sweeping immigration bill on Day One of his administration, hoping to provide an eight-year path to citizenship for an estimated 11 million people living in the US without legal status, a massive reversal from the Trump administration's harsh immigration policies.

The legislation puts Biden on track to deliver on a major campaign promise important to Latino voters and other immigrant communities after four years of President Donald Trump's restrictive policies and mass deportations. It provides one of the fastest pathways to citizenship for those living without legal status of any measure in recent years, but it fails to include the traditional trade-off of enhanced border security favoured by many Republicans, making passage in a narrowly divided Congress in doubt.

Expected to run hundreds of pages, the bill is set to be introduced after Biden takes the oath of office Wednesday, according to a person familiar with the legislation and

granted anonymity to discuss it.

As a candidate, Biden called Trump's actions on immigration an "unrelenting assault" on American values and said he would "undo the damage" while continuing to maintain border enforcement.

Under the legislation, those living in the US as of January 1, 2021, without legal status would have a five-year path to temporary legal status, or a green card, if they pass background checks, pay taxes and fulfil other basic requirements. From there, it's a three-year path to naturalization, if they decide to pursue citizenship.

For some immigrants, the process would be quicker. So-called Dreamers, the young people who arrived in the US illegally as children, as well as agricultural workers and people under temporary protective status could qualify more immediately for green cards if they are working, are in school or meet other requirements.

Biden is expected to take swift executive actions to reverse other Trump immigration actions, including an end to the prohibition on arrivals from several predominantly Muslim countries.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Qatar calls for Gulf talks with Iran

Qatar has called for Gulf Arab countries to hold talks with Iran, the foreign minister said in an interview aired yesterday, after Doha reconciled with its neighbours following a rift. Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, who has previously called for dialogue with Iran, told Bloomberg TV he was "hopeful that this would happen and we still believe this should happen". "This is also a desire that's shared by other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries," he said. It comes weeks after GCC hawks Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE re-established ties with Qatar after breaking them off in June 2017 partly over allegations that Qatar was too close to Iran. Doha maintains cordial relations with Tehran.

China rescuers drill new 'lifelines' to trapped miners

Chinese rescuers drilled several fresh holes yesterday to reach at least 12 gold miners trapped underground for nine days, as dwindling food supplies and rising waters threatened their survival. Twenty-two workers have been stuck 540 metres underground at the Hushan mine near Yantai in east China's Shandong province after an explosion damaged the entrance. After days without any signs of life, some of the trapped miners managed to send up a note attached to a metal wire which rescuers had dropped into the mine on Sunday. Pleading for help, the handwritten message said a dozen of them were alive but surrounded by water and in need of urgent medical supplies. A subsequent phone call with the miners revealed 11 were in one location 540 metres below the surface with another -- apparently alone -- trapped a further 100 metres down.

Tunisia rocked by fourth night of street riots

Tunisia was rocked by a fourth night of street clashes between riot police and youths in mostly working class neighbourhoods, and there were calls on social media for more rallies yesterday. More than 600 people had been arrested by Monday over the disturbances in which teenagers and adolescents have hurled rocks and Molotov cocktails at police who have fired volleys of teargas at them. The social unrest comes at a time of economic crisis, worsened by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the tourism-reliant North African country, that has deepened poverty and driven up inflation and unemployment. Early yesterday, hundreds of youths in the capital battled police in several districts. Clashes were also reported in the towns of Sfax, the second largest city, Gafsa, Le Kef, Bizerte, Kasserine, Sousse and Monastir.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

STUDY ON NEW CORONAVIRUS VARIANT

Previous infection may offer less protection

REUTERS, Johannesburg

Previous infection with the coronavirus may offer less protection against the new variant first identified in South Africa, scientists said on Monday, although they hope that vaccines will still work.

Studies also found that the new variant binds more strongly and readily to human cells. That helps explain why it seems to be spreading around 50% quicker than previous versions, leading South African epidemiologist Salim Abdool Karim said.

The 501Y.V2 variant was identified by South African genomics experts late last year. It has been the main driver of a second wave of national COVID-19 infections, which hit a new daily peak above 21,000 cases earlier this month. It is one of several new variants found in recent months, including others first discovered in England and Brazil, which scientists worry are hastening the spread of COVID-19.

"Convalescent serum studies suggest natural antibodies are less effective," Abdool Karim said, introducing the research, "(but) current data suggest the new variant is not more severe."

British scientists and politicians have expressed concern that vaccines currently being deployed or in development could be less effective against the variant.

Scientists speaking at the virtual panel on Monday said there was not yet a clear answer to that question and that studies were continuing.

"Our immune systems are extraordinarily clever," Willem Hanekom, one of the team, said. "There may be compensation through other arms of the immune system that allow vaccines to still work."

The 501Y.V2 variant has spread to nations in Europe, Asia and the Americas, as well as several other African countries, causing some states to impose restrictions on travel to and from South Africa.



Honduran migrants react after Guatemalan security forces cleared a road where they have been camping after authorities halted their trek to the United States, in Vado Hondo, Guatemala, on Monday. The removal of the large group was the latest effort by Guatemalan authorities to break up the caravan, which authorities said numbered nearly 8,000 people.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Macron hails French Muslim charter against extremism

AFP, Paris

President Emmanuel Macron has praised French Muslim leaders after they agreed on a "charter of principles" aimed at combatting sectarianism and radicalised teachings blamed for a surge in jihadist attacks in France in recent years.

The charter offers "a clarification of how the Muslim community is organised," Macron said after a meeting with representatives of the French Council of the Muslim Faith (CFCM), his office said.

It will also provide a framework for a new National Council of Imams that will be responsible for vetting imams practising in the country.

"This is a clear, decisive and precise commitment in favour of the republic," Macron said, hailing "a truly foundational text for relations between the state and Islam in France."

Macron had urged the council to act against "political Islam" in November after the killing of Samuel Paty, a teacher who was beheaded outside



his school after showing controversial cartoons of the Prophet Mohamed as part of a free-speech lesson.

The attack prompted a crackdown against extremist mosques and Islamist associations, along with a vigorous defence of French secularism.

The new 10-point charter "states clearly that the principles of the Muslim faith are perfectly compatible with the principles of the republic," CFCM president Mohammed Moussaoui told journalists after the meeting.

The accord was hammered out Saturday after weeks of resistance from some CFCM members who objected to a "restructuring" of Islam.

The charter rejects "instrumentalising" Islam for political ends and affirms equality between men and women. It also explicitly rejects racism and anti-Semitism, and warns that mosques "are not created for the spreading of nationalist speech defending foreign regimes".

Troops deployed in Darfur after clashes kill 155

AFP, Khartoum

A heavy Sudanese troop presence helped restore calm yesterday in the Darfur region, local sources said, after three days of inter-ethnic violence which claimed at least 155 lives and displaced tens of thousands.

The transitional government in the capital Khartoum has deployed military units to the remote region, where the recent end of a joint United Nation and African Union peacekeeping mission raised fears of more bloodshed.

Violence erupted Saturday between Arab nomads and members of the non-Arab Massalit ethnic group in El Geneina, the capital of West Darfur, killing at least 100 people and wounding more than 130, said state governor Mohamed Abdalla al-Douma.

The clashes prompted some 50,000 people to flee areas in and around a camp for internally displaced people (IDPs) who were driven from their homes in previous conflicts, said aid group Save the Children.

Authorities in West Darfur have imposed a statewide curfew as troops arrived there from Khartoum and other parts of Sudan to restore order.

"There have been no clashes since Sunday, but there were incidents of looting, especially of houses and farms of people living at the Kerindig IDP camp," Douma told AFP.

Separate clashes on Monday in South Darfur between members of the Fallata ethnic group and the Arab Rizeigat tribe killed at least 55 people and wounded 37.

In 2003, conflict in Darfur killed some 300,000 people and displaced 2.5 million. It had flared when ethnic minority rebels rose up against dictator Omar al-Bashir's Arab-dominated government. Khartoum responded by unleashing a notorious Arab-dominated militia.

The latest violence came after the United Nations and African Union peacekeeping mission, UNAMID, ended its 13 years of operations in Darfur on December 31.