



(From top, clockwise) Health workers administer Covid-19 tests at a free public testing site in Farragut Square in Washington, on Thursday; cars line up at a drive-thru Covid-19 testing site at Tropical Park on in Miami, Florida; and general view of the empty Paseo de Gracia in Barcelona, on the night of December 23 to December 24, 2021, as Spain's Catalonia reimposes a night-time curfew.



PHOTO: AFP



Get jabbed for Christmas

Johnson urges UK as virus surges

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson in his Christmas Eve message yesterday exhorted the UK public to get jabbed as a "wonderful" gift for the nation as cases soar.

Johnson said that while little time remained to buy gifts, "there is still a wonderful thing you can give your family and the whole country... and that is to get that jab, whether it is your first or second, or your booster".

The prime minister has rejected harsher virus restrictions in England over Christmas despite a record surge in cases driven by the Omicron variant.

He has focused instead on a drive to offer booster jabs to all adults by the end of the year.

He acknowledged that "after two years of this pandemic, I can't say that we are through it", as the UK set a new record on Thursday of almost 120,000 cases in 24 hours.

Last year Johnson imposed a stay at home order on December 19 for London and southeast England that meant millions had to change Christmas plans.

This year he opted not to tighten rules, saying in his message that "for millions of families up and down the country, I hope and believe that this Christmas is, and will be, significantly better than the last".

People must test themselves before meeting vulnerable relatives, he cautioned, while encouraging them to enjoy a jolly family Christmas.

If the pile of wrapping paper is bigger than last year due to more family members attending, it's because of the vaccine rollout, he stressed.

He also said that getting a vaccine accorded with the teaching of Jesus Christ that "we should love our neighbours as we love ourselves".

Johnson's popularity has been battered by reports of parties held by Downing Street and other government departments during lockdown periods, and his party lost a by-election in a previously safe seat this month.

Inaction may kill thousands

Says Germany as it warns of 'worst humanitarian catastrophe'

AGENCIES

Germany's new foreign minister, Annalena Baerbock, has pledged to work with international partners to help avert in Afghanistan what she called "the worst humanitarian catastrophe of our time".

Outlining an "action plan" two weeks after taking office, Baerbock said Berlin sought to assure that outside aid reached the neediest Afghans and step up the evacuation of those most threatened under the Taliban, especially women and girls.

"Before our eyes, Afghanistan is heading into the worst humanitarian catastrophe of our time," Baerbock told reporters on Thursday.

"Major sectors of the economy have collapsed, many people are starving. One can hardly bear it when one reads that families in their desperation are selling their daughters to buy food."

She said 24 million Afghans were estimated to need assistance to survive this winter.

"We cannot allow hundreds of thousands of children to die because we don't want to take action," Baerbock said.

Berlin would "seek ways with our international partners so that humanitarian aid arrives in the country and bring those particularly in need of protection out of the country".

CRISIS IN AFGHANISTAN

Baerbock said such efforts were also aimed at "preventing further destabilisation on the ground".

Since the Taliban swept back to power in August, billions of dollars in aid and assets have been frozen by the West in what the UN has described as an "unprecedented fiscal shock" to the aid-dependent Afghan economy.

The United Nation Security Council on Wednesday unanimously adopted a US-proposed resolution to help humanitarian aid reach

desperate Afghans, while seeking to keep funds out of Taliban hands.

On the same day, the United States formally exempted US and UN officials doing permitted business with the Taliban from US sanctions to try to maintain the flow of aid to Afghanistan.

The Treasury issued three general licenses aimed at easing humanitarian aid flows into Afghanistan.

Two of the licenses allow US officials and those of certain international organizations, such as the United Nations, to engage in transactions involving the Taliban or Haqqani Network for official business.

A third license gives non-governmental organizations (NGOs) protection from U.S. sanctions on the Taliban and the Haqqani Network for work on certain activities, including humanitarian projects.

A senior US administration official said the Taliban would have to take action to prevent Afghanistan's economy from contracting further.

CAPITOL RIOT PROBE

Trump asks US SC to block release of White House records

REUTERS, Washington

Former President Donald Trump asked the US Supreme Court on Thursday to block the release of White House records sought by the House of Representatives committee investigating the deadly Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol.

interests of the nation.

Trump's lawyers said in their court filing that the House Select Committee's request is "exceedingly broad" and an "unprecedented encroachment on executive privilege."

The appeals court ruling was another blow to the Republican former president and his allies, who have waged an ongoing legal battle with the committee over access to documents and witnesses.

The committee has asked the National Archives, the US agency housing Trump's White House records, to produce visitor logs, phone records and written communications between his advisers.

The panel has said it needs the records to understand any role Trump may have played in fomenting the violence.

The Supreme Court has a 6-3 conservative majority that includes three justices appointed by Trump, but it has not always been receptive to his requests.



DECEMBER 25

1066 - William the Conqueror is crowned King of England at Westminster Abbey, completing the Norman conquest of England.

1868 - Despite bitter opposition, US President Andrew Johnson grants unconditional pardon to all persons involved in Southern rebellion (Civil War).

1991 - Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev resigned, ceding power in Russia to Boris Yeltsin and marking the end of the Soviet Union.

SOURCE: REUTERS

MORE NEWS

Japan unveils record budget and defence spend

Japan's government yesterday unveiled its biggest ever full-year budget, including record defence spending to counter intensifying regional security threats. Cabinet ministers approved a draft national budget of a whopping 107.6 trillion yen (\$940 billion) for the 2022-23 fiscal year, including 5.4 trillion yen for defence. The defence ministry said the regional security situation was becoming "increasingly severe at an unprecedented speed", noting challenges posed by China and North Korea. Its draft budget includes 127.8 billion yen for the purchase of 12 F-35 fighter jets, and aims to boost "capability in new areas such as space, cyberspace and electromagnetic waves".

Canada meets 2021 immigration target

Canada met its target of granting 401,000 foreigners permanent residency in 2021 by focusing its efforts on temporary residents already in the country, Immigration Minister Sean Fraser said on Thursday. Canada, which depends on immigration to drive its economy and support an aging population, saw new permanent residents falling over 45 percent to 185,000 in 2020, when borders were largely closed due to Covid-19. The majority of the new 401,000 permanent residents - a figure reached for the first time in more than a century - were already in Canada on temporary status, according to a statement from the immigration minister. The government has said it hopes to add 411,000 new permanent residents next year.

Iran nuclear talks to resume next week: EU

Talks to revive the 2015 Iran nuclear deal will resume next Monday, the EU diplomat chairing the negotiations said on Thursday, urging a "picking up of the pace". Officials have said the deal would become obsolete within weeks if Iran continued to step up its nuclear activities as it has been doing since 2019, a year after the United States left the landmark agreement and reimposed sanctions. Negotiations restarted in November after a five-month hiatus to try to restore the deal, which was to offer Iran sanctions relief in exchange for curbs on its nuclear programme. US negotiator Rob Malley on Tuesday warned of a "period of escalating crisis" if diplomacy failed to restore the agreement. Iran claims it only wants to develop a civilian nuclear capability, but Western powers believe Tehran has other motives.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

Assange lawyers launch appeal against extradition

AFP, London

Lawyers for Julian Assange have launched an appeal before Britain's Supreme Court against a High Court ruling that he may be extradited to the United States, the WikiLeaks founder's fiancée said Thursday.

The December 10 decision by the High Court in London reversed an earlier judgement by a British magistrates' court that it would be "oppressive" to extradite the 50-year-old Australian to the US justice system due to his mental health and the risk of suicide.

The United States wants Assange to face trial for WikiLeaks' publication in 2010 of classified military documents relating to its wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The US government has indicted Assange on 18 charges relating to the release of 500,000 secret files on the conflicts. He could be jailed for up to 175 years in the US, although the exact sentence is difficult to estimate.

Assange's fiancée Stella Moris, herself a lawyer, said on Twitter that his lawyers filed an appeal to the extradition ruling on Thursday. Moris said no decision regarding a Supreme Court appeal can be expected before the third week of January.

A two-day hearing in October saw lawyers for the United States argue that a lower court judge had not given sufficient weight to other expert testimony about his mental state.

They also pointed to diplomatic assurances provided since the January decision that Assange would not be held in punishing isolation at a federal supermax prison, and would receive appropriate care.

Approving the appeal, two judges at the High Court in London accepted the new assurances, noting they were not unusual in such cases and "solemn undertakings offered by one government to another".

Assange has been in custody since 2019, despite having served a previous sentence for breaching bail conditions in a separate case.

He spent seven years at Ecuador's embassy in London to avoid being removed to Sweden to face sexual assault allegations that were later dropped.

RUSSIA SECURITY PROPOSALS OVER UKRAINE TENSIONS

Putin sees 'positive' US reaction

AFP, Moscow

President Vladimir Putin said that Washington's willingness to discuss Russia's security proposals to curb Nato's eastward expansion was "positive", as fears mount in the West over a major military escalation in Ukraine.

The Kremlin has grown increasingly insistent that the West and Nato are encroaching dangerously close to Russia's borders. Moscow presented the West with sweeping security demands last week, saying Nato must not admit new members and seeking to bar the United States from establishing new bases in former Soviet republics.

Washington responded that it is willing to discuss the security proposals -- within weeks according to a US official -- and Putin said Thursday that Washington is ready for talks at the start of next year in Geneva. "The start of negotiations announced



(for) January will allow us to move forward," Putin said at his annual end-of-year press conference, adding that representatives from both sides have been appointed.

"I hope that this is the first positive reaction."

A senior US official said Washington was "ready to engage in diplomacy as soon as early January", both bilaterally and through "multiple channels".

Putin's conciliatory tone Thursday came after tensions peaked this week when he vowed that Russia would take "appropriate retaliatory" military steps in response to what he called the West's "aggressive stance". He also announced a new arsenal of hypersonic missiles that he has previously described as "invincible" were nearing combat readiness.

Tensions have been building since mid-November when Washington sounded the alarm over a massive Russian troop build-up on Ukraine's border and claimed that Putin is planning an invasion.

The West has long accused the Kremlin of providing direct military support to pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine, who seized two regions shortly after Moscow annexed Crimea in 2014.

The Russia denies the claims and Putin has suggested that the conflict, which has claimed over 13,000 lives, is genocidal.



Mahouts and their elephants pose for children during Christmas celebrations at the Jirasart Wittaya school in Ayutthaya, Thailand, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Vaccinated Santa gets nod for Canada travel

AFP, Ottawa

Santa has been cleared for travel in Canada's airspace after showing proof of vaccination and a pre-flight negative Covid test, the transport minister said Thursday.

"This year, I'm delighted to clear Santa and his crew for travel in Canadian skies," the minister, Omar Alghabra said in a statement.

"When I spoke to Santa (in a call to the North Pole), he assured me that he met all the pre-entry requirements to re-enter Canada," he said.

Santa's flight crew -- including reindeer Rudolph, whose "nose shone red and bright (but) made sure he had no Covid-19 symptoms before taking off" -- have also been given the all clear.

Last week, Ottawa advised Canadians against non-essential foreign travel over the Christmas holidays.

Several provinces, meanwhile, have reimposed public health restrictions including gathering size limits.

"By doing your part to keep others safe," urged Alghabra, including getting vaccinated, wearing a mask, and staying six feet or "at least a dozen or so candy canes apart, you'll find yourself atop the Nice List this year."