



People celebrate the New year with carbide shootings in Wierden, the Netherlands, yesterday. Carbide shooting does not fall under the one-off national fireworks ban that has been announced by the Dutch authorities as part of the measure to curb the spread of Covid-19.

PHOTO: STAR

Further sanctions will 'rapture' ties

Putin warns Biden over Ukraine



REUTERS, Wilmington

US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin have exchanged warnings over Ukraine but conveyed some optimism that diplomatic talks in January could ease spiraling tensions.

In a 50-minute call, their second conversation this month, Biden said he needed to see Russia decrease its military build-up near Ukraine, while Putin said sanctions threatened by Washington and allies could lead to a rupture in ties. The call was requested by Putin.

The leaders' exchange set the stage for lower-level engagement between the countries, including a Jan 9-10 US-Russia security meeting, followed by a Russia-Nato session on Jan 12, and a broader conference including Moscow, Washington and other European countries slated for Jan 13.

In Kyiv, leaders worry about the 60,000 to 90,000 Russian troops that have gathered to its north, east and south. Russia denies planning to attack Ukraine and says it has the right to move its troops on its own soil.

Biden reiterated his threat of unprecedented sanctions if Russia chose to invade Ukraine.

Kremlin said Putin "immediately responded" that any sanctions now or later "could lead to a complete rapture in ties between our countries." He added: "Our president also mentioned that it would be a mistake that our descendants would see as a huge error."

The Kremlin said Biden appeared to agree with Putin's contention that Moscow needed some security guarantees from the West and also that he said the US did not intend to deploy offensive weapons in Ukraine.

WORLD RINGS in New Year under Covid-19 cloud

Parties slashed as new wave hammers the world

AFP, Sydney

The world began ushering in 2022 yesterday after another tumultuous and pandemic-ridden year capped by new restrictions, soaring case numbers, and a slight glimmer of hope for better times ahead.

The past 12 months saw a new US president and a new Adele album, the first spectator-free Olympics, and dreams of democracy from Afghanistan to Myanmar and Hong Kong crushed by authoritarian regimes.

But it was the pandemic -- now entering its third year -- that again dominated life for most of humankind.

More than 5.4 million have died since the Covid was first reported in central China in December 2019.

Countless more have been sickened -- subjected to outbreaks, lockdowns, lock-ins and an alphabet spaghetti of PCR, LFT and RAT tests.

The year 2021 started with hope, as life-saving vaccines were rolled out to around 60 percent of the world's population, although many of its poor still have limited access, and some of its rich believe the jabs are part of some ill-defined plot.

As the year drew to a close, the emergence of the Omicron variant pushed the number of daily new Covid-19 cases past one million for the first time, according to an AFP tally.

France became the latest country to announce

Omicron was now its dominant coronavirus strain on Friday.

Parts of the Pacific nation of Kiribati became the first to welcome in the new year from 1000 GMT. But from Seoul to San Francisco, celebrations have again been cancelled or curtailed as infections rise.

One notable exception though was South Africa -- the first country to report Omicron back in November -- where a curfew was lifted to allow festivities to go ahead.

Health officials said that a dip in infections in the past week indicated the peak of the current wave had passed -- crucially without a significant increase in deaths.

Australia's largest city Sydney has also decided to press ahead with a firework display that lit up the city's harbour.

Dubai is planning a pyrotechnics spectacle at the Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest tower, despite a slew of infections in the United Arab Emirates.

In Rio, celebrations on Copacabana Beach will go ahead in a scaled back format -- though crowds of revellers are still expected.

In India, fearing a repeat of a devastating virus surge that overwhelmed the country in April and May, cities and states have imposed restrictions on gatherings, with Delhi implementing a 10 pm curfew.

Many Western leaders have been hesitant to reimpose strict controls seen in 2020, for fear of sparking a new economic downturn.

Experts and non-experts alike hope that 2022 may be remembered as a new, less deadly phase of the pandemic.

"Hopefully 2022 is going to be better for everyone," said 31-year-old reveller Oscar Ramirez in Sydney.

"Everyone in the world needs a big change."

More than 5.4 million people have died since the coronavirus was first reported in central China in December 2019.

Israeli troops kill Palestinian 'knifeman'

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli troops yesterday shot dead a Palestinian man who attempted to stab soldiers and civilians at a bus stop in the occupied West Bank, the military said.

The army said the attempted stabbing took place near the Gitain Avisar junction in the West Bank. The Palestinian, it said, approached a military post in a car "and got out of the vehicle armed with a knife". The man "ran towards the bus station where civilians and IDF soldiers were standing. The troops fired towards the assailant and neutralised him", the army added.

According to the Israeli army's annual report, 100 attacks were carried out in 2021 against Israelis in the West Bank, up from 60 a year earlier. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs recorded 410 attacks by Israeli settlers against Palestinians in the first 10 months of 2021, compared to 358 in the whole of 2020.

The latest attack came after Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas made a rare visit Wednesday to Israel for talks with Defence Minister Benny Gantz.

US truck driver's 110-year sentence reduced after outcry

AFP, Los Angeles

A truck driver whose 110 year sentence over a deadly crash sparked outrage had his jail term reduced to ten years on Thursday.

More than 4.5 million people called for a reduction in Rogel Aguilera-Mederos' punishment. He was transporting timber in April 2019 when his brakes failed on a downhill stretch. His out-of-control truck plowed into traffic, killing four people and injuring several others.

Aguilera-Mederos will be eligible to apply for parole in five years.



Colorado wildfires destroy hundreds of homes

AFP, Superior

Fast-moving wildfires in the US state of Colorado destroyed hundreds of homes and forced at least 33,000 people to flee, officials have said, as flames tore through areas desiccated by a historic drought.

At least 1,600 acres have burned in Boulder County, much of it suburban, with officials warning that deaths and injuries were likely as the blaze took hold of a hotel, shopping center and apartment complex in the town of Superior.

The fast-moving fires are thought to have begun when power lines were toppled by gusting winds.



The US government bears definitive international responsibility for this crime. Undoubtedly, the criminal act of the United States in martyring general #Soleimani is a clear manifestation of a 'terrorist attack' that was orchestrated and carried out in an organised manner by the then US government for which the White House is now responsible.

Iran's foreign ministry said in a statement posted on Twitter to mark the second anniversary of Soleimani's killing



People queue to buy Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) cylinders in Colombo yesterday, as shortages of essentials gripped the island following a severe shortage of foreign exchange to finance imports.

PHOTO: AFP

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Happy New Year
2022

May this year bring new inspirations, new goals and new achievements in your life.
Wishing you a year full of happiness.

The Premier Bank Limited