



In this photograph taken Saturday, an Afghan burqa-clad woman walks past Taliban fighters in vehicles taking part in a military street parade in Maymana, capital of Faryab province. Protests erupted last week in Maymana after an Uzbek Taliban commander was detained for alleged links to a kidnapping plot. The unrest sparked fears of tensions between Uzbek and Pashtun civilians and Taliban fighters, with unconfirmed reports that members of both ethnic groups had been killed in isolated clashes.

PHOTO: AFP

## Return of the flu Covid-hit Europe faces threat of prolonged ‘twindemic’

REUTERS, Brussels

Influenza has returned to Europe at a faster-than-expected rate this winter after almost disappearing last year, raising concerns about a prolonged “twindemic” with Covid-19 amid some doubts about the effectiveness of flu vaccines.

Lockdowns, mask-wearing and social distancing that have become the norm in Europe during the Covid-19 pandemic knocked out flu last winter, temporarily eradicating a virus that globally kills about 650,000 a year, according to EU figures.

But that has now changed as countries adopt less strict measures to fight Covid-19 due to widespread vaccination. Since mid-December, flu viruses have been circulating in Europe at a higher-than-expected rate, the European Centre for Disease prevention and Control (ECDC) reported this month.

In December, the number of flu cases in European intensive care units (ICU) rose steadily to peak at 43 in the last week of the year, ECDC and World Health Organization data show.

That is well below pre-pandemic levels – with weekly flu cases in ICU’s peaking at over 400 at the same stage in 2018, for example.

But it is a big increase on last year, when there was only one flu case in an ICU in the whole of December, data show. The return of the virus could be the start of an unusually long flu season that could stretch well into the summer, the ECDC’s top expert on influenza Pasi Penttinen told Reuters.

“If we start to lift all measures, the big concern I have for influenza is that, because we have had such a long time of almost no circulation in the European population, maybe we will shift away from normal seasonal patterns,” he said.

He said dismantling restrictive measures in the spring could prolong the circulation of flu far beyond the normal end of the European season in May.

A “twindemic” could put excessive pressure on already overstretched health systems, the ECDC said in its report.

In France, three regions are facing a flu epidemic, according to the French health ministry. Further complicating matters, the dominant flu strain circulating this year appears so far to be the H3 of the A virus, which usually causes the most severe cases among the elderly.



## Confrontation only invites catastrophe

Xi warns world leaders at an all-virtual Davos forum



AFP, Beijing

Chinese President Xi Jinping yesterday warned that confrontation between major powers could have “catastrophic consequences” in a speech to world leaders at an all-virtual Davos forum.

For the second year in a row the face-to-face gathering of political and corporate power players in the Swiss Alps has had to go online thanks to a coronavirus pandemic that shows no sign of abating.

Xi opened proceedings with a speech much like the one he delivered virtually last year.

He touted China – where the coronavirus first emerged in late 2019 – as a rare pandemic success story and the only major economy to continue posting strong growth.

He presented himself as the defender of multilateralism and also gave sober warnings for the future as relations between major powers plunge.

“Our world today is far from the tranquil, rhetoric that stokes hatred and prejudice abound,” he said, according to an official translation of the speech which was streamed online.

“History has proved time and again that confrontation does not solve problems, it only

invites catastrophic consequences,” he added.

China stuck to a strict policy of targeting zero Covid cases once it stamped out its initial outbreak.

Its borders remain largely closed to outsiders but it has remained the world’s vital manufacturing base throughout the pandemic.

In his speech to the World Economic Forum in Davos, Xi said the world had fought a “tenacious battle” against the “once in a century pandemic”.

But he said the pandemic was “proving a protracted one” with new variants spreading faster than before, deepening challenges for the global economy.

“The global industrial supply chains have been disrupted,” Xi warned. “Commodity prices continue to rise, energy supply remains tight.”

But there were no announcements in the speech on when or whether Beijing might relax its tight border controls.

China has remained comparatively free of the coronavirus but is currently battling a spate of local outbreaks in multiple provinces and key cities just weeks before it hosts the Winter Olympics in Beijing.

Xi is also moving to secure a third term at a major gathering of the Communist Party this autumn.

## North Korea fires two more ballistic missiles

REUTERS, Seoul

North Korea fired two suspected short-range ballistic missiles (SRBM) yesterday from an airport in its capital city of Pyongyang, South Korea’s military reported, the fourth test this month to demonstrate its expanding missile arsenal.

Japan also reported the launch, with chief cabinet secretary Hirokazu Matsuno condemning it as a threat to peace and security while China urged all sides to preserve for stability.

“We call on relevant sides to keep in mind the overall peace and stability on the peninsula,” Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian told a daily briefing in Beijing when asked about the suspected launch.

Nuclear-armed North Korea had already conducted three other missile tests in less than two weeks before Monday, an unusually rapid series of launches. It said two of them involved single “hypersonic missiles” capable of high speed and manoeuvring after launch, while a test on Friday involved a pair of short-range ballistic missiles fired from train cars.

Yesterday’s launch appeared to involve two SRBMs fired east from Sunan Airfield in Pyongyang, South Korea’s Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) said. North Korea used the airport to test fire the Hwasong-12 intermediate-range ballistic missile in 2017, with leader Kim Jong Un in attendance.

The missiles fired on Monday travelled about 380 km to a maximum altitude of 42 km, the JCS said in a statement.



## UK to cut funding for BBC: report

REUTERS, London

Britain’s government will cut the BBC’s funding by ordering a two-year freeze on the fee that people pay to watch the broadcaster, the Mail on Sunday reported. The future of the licence-payer funded British Broadcasting Corporation is a perpetual topic of political debate, with Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s government most recently suggesting its funding needs to be reformed. Set against an inflation rate expected to reach a 30-year high of 6% or more in April, freezing the licence cost at its current 159 pounds (\$217.40) would provide some relief to consumers battling sharply rising costs of living. But it would also be a large blow to the BBC’s finances as it tries to compete with privately funded news outlets.

## China’s birth rate at record low in 2021

AFP, Beijing

China’s birth rate plummeted to a record low last year, official data showed yesterday, as analysts warn that faster-than-expected ageing could deepen economic growth concerns. Beijing has been grappling with a looming demographic crisis as it faces a rapidly ageing workforce, slowing economy and the country’s weakest population growth in decades. The birth rate of the world’s second-biggest economy slipped to 7.52 births per 1,000 people, according to National Bureau of Statistics data, down from 8.52 in 2020. The figures are the lowest since records began in 1949.



There are some understandings between us. But in general, in principle, we can now say that we are staying on different tracks, on totally different tracks. And this is not good. This is disturbing.

Kremlin spokesman  
Dmitry Peskov  
tells CNN on Russia-  
West dialogue

## TEXAS SYNAGOGUE ATTACK UK police arrest two teenagers

REUTERS

A gunman who took four people hostage at a Dallas-area synagogue and was himself killed as federal agents stormed the temple was identified on Sunday as a British citizen, while police in England said they had detained two teenagers for questioning in the investigation.

The daylong siege at the Congregation Beth Israel synagogue in Colleyville, about 16 miles northeast of Fort Worth, Texas, ended in gunfire Saturday night with all four hostages released unharmed and with the suspect dead. It was not clear whether the gunman took his own life or was slain by members of the FBI hostage rescue team.

During 10 hours of tense hostage negotiations conducted by authorities on either side of the Atlantic with help from the gunman’s family, the suspect was reported to have demanded the release of Pakistani neuroscientist Aafia Siddiqui, who is serving an 86-year federal prison sentence on a 2010 conviction for shooting at soldiers and FBI agents.

The FBI on Sunday identified the suspect as Malik Faisal Akram, 44. Akram’s brother Gulbar posted on Facebook that the suspect, from the town of Blackburn in the north of England, suffered from mental illness.



People walk along Main St. in the snow in Greenville, South Carolina, on Sunday. A winter storm brought snow, sleet and freezing rain to parts of the Carolinas and Georgia, where nearly 200,000 were left without power.

PHOTO: AFP