



A woman shouts and begs for alms next to children sleeping on a market area on a cold day in Kabul, Afghanistan, yesterday. Afghanistan is already in the grip of a humanitarian disaster, worsened by the Taliban takeover of the country in August when Western countries froze international aid and access to assets held abroad. The United Nations has warned that half the 38 million population faces acute food shortages.

PHOTO: AFP

## 'Covid should be treated like flu'

### Spain leads calls to reclassify the coronavirus pandemic

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Spain is spearheading calls for governments to start tackling Covid-19 as any other endemic respiratory virus like seasonal flu, despite WHO opposition and warnings that the approach is premature.

With governments and populations worldwide desperate for an end to the pandemic, discussion about when the virus might be reclassified has intensified.

"Spain wants to lead this debate because it is timely and necessary to do so," Health Minister Carolina Darias has said, adding that Spain asked the European Centre for Disease Prevention (ECDC) to "study new strategies" to deal with Covid.

Spain is in a good position to open the debate, having one of the world's highest vaccination rates with 90.5 per cent of its population over the age of 12 fully immunised.

But the question has sparked disagreement between governments seeking some sort of normality and some parts of the medical community which advocate keeping its guard up.

The United States on Wednesday also reported that the latest wave of cases driven by the Omicron variant appears to be receding. The fast to rise, fast to fall graph could follow the same pattern seen in other countries hit by the highly-mutated strain.

On Tuesday, however, World Health Organization chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus insisted that the pandemic was "nowhere near over", warning that new variants were still "likely to emerge".

The WHO also warned against the temptation to play down the seriousness of an endemic disease.

Fernando Garcia, an epidemiologist and the spokesman of a public health association, warned that talk of treating Covid-19 as an endemic illness at this stage was "creating false hope".

Meanwhile, a study conducted and published by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on Wednesday showed that people who were unvaccinated but survived Covid were better protected than those who were vaccinated and not previously infected.

The study, which was done before the emergence of the Omicron variant, showed that protection was highest among those who had both vaccination and prior Covid.



## 'He'll move in'

Biden on Putin's intentions over invading Ukraine; Russia announces massive drills ahead of Blinken-Lavrov meet



AFP, Washington

Russia yesterday condemned US President Joe Biden's vow of a "severe" response to any invasion of Ukraine as "destabilising", as US Secretary of State Antony Blinken opened talks with key European allies for a common strategy against Moscow.

The Kremlin's reaction came after Biden in Washington assessed that Vladimir Putin will "move in" on Ukraine and warned that would be a "disaster for Russia".

Biden said he did not believe that Putin wants a war, but said the Russian leader has created a situation that is proving extremely difficult to defuse -- and that could easily "get out of hand" in the region.

"My guess is he will move in. He has to do something," Biden said during a press conference marking his first year in office.

However, Biden raised eyebrows when he appeared to suggest that a small-scale attack by the Russians would prompt much less pushback from the West.

The White House quickly issued a statement clarifying that what he meant was that any military invasion would prompt a "severe" response, while non-military aggression, like paramilitary attacks, would be met with a "reciprocal" response.

Powerful Republican Senator Lindsey Graham described Biden's comment as "unnerving."

Biden was speaking ahead of a meeting today in Geneva between US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Geneva.

With more than 100,000 troops and war-making machinery poised on Ukraine's borders, Moscow has sent alarms through the West over its threat to Kyiv.

Biden appeared to suggest ways of deconfliction, playing down Putin's biggest worries, that Ukraine would join Nato and that the West would position strategic weapons in Ukraine.

Speaking on the eve of the anniversary of his inauguration on January 20, 2021, Biden rejected criticism over his handling of the pandemic and soaring inflation.

On one of the most traumatic episodes of his presidency -- the chaotic and rushed final withdrawal from the 20-year long Afghanistan war -- Biden said flatly: "I make no apologies."

Biden also confirmed he would keep Kamala Harris as his vice presidential running mate if he seeks re-election in 2024.

Meanwhile, Russia yesterday announced it will hold huge naval drills in the Atlantic, Arctic, Pacific and Mediterranean this month and February. The war games will involve "more than 140 warships and support vessels, more than 60 aircraft, 1,000 pieces of military equipment, and about 10,000 servicemen," the defence ministry said in a statement carried by Russian news agencies.

## Antibiotic-resistant superbugs killed 1.2m in 2019: study

AFP, Paris

Superbug infections killed 1.2 million people in 2019, according to a study published yesterday, which authors described as the most comprehensive assessment of the impact of antimicrobial resistance to date. The death toll means infections by bacteria resistant to antibiotics are directly responsible for more deaths than HIV/AIDS or malaria. The report, published in the Lancet, also found antimicrobial resistance played a role in up to 3.68 million other deaths. "These new data reveal the true scale of antimicrobial resistance worldwide, and are a clear signal that we must act now to combat the threat," said study co-author Chris Murray of the University of Washington. While previous estimates said superbugs could kill 10 million people per year by 2050, this study shows that milestone could be reached much sooner, he added. Antimicrobial resistance occurs as bacteria evolve to be immune to antibiotics. The World Health Organization has declared it a global health crisis, setting up a task force to study alternative treatments.



## RELEASE OF CAPITOL RIOT DOCS US SC snubs Trump

AFP, Washington

The US Supreme Court on Wednesday rejected a bid by former president Donald Trump to block the release to a congressional committee of documents related to the January 6 attack on the Capitol. Trump, who has been accused of fomenting the Capitol assault, had asked the nation's highest court to stay a ruling by a federal appeals court, which rejected his efforts to keep the documents secret. But the Supreme Court, in an 8-1 vote, refused to issue a stay and upheld the lower court's ruling, in a significant setback for the former president.

## Lahore blast kills 2

AFP, Lahore

At least two people were killed and 22 wounded yesterday by a bomb blast in a busy shopping district of the Pakistani megacity of Lahore, police and officials said. "Initial investigations show that it was a time-controlled device on a motorbike which was the cause of the blast," Rana Arif, spokesman for Lahore police, told AFP. There was no immediate claim of responsibility, but there have been a series of blasts and attacks against police since December, when a truce between the government and Pakistan's Taliban lapsed.

## Liberia stampede kills at least 29

AFP, Monrovia

A stampede killed at least 29 people at a religious event in the suburbs of the Liberian capital Monrovia, police said yesterday. The disaster occurred overnight, either late Wednesday or in the early hours of yesterday, local media reported. Police spokesman Moses Carter said the death toll was provisional and "may increase". Details about the event remain unclear. Local media said it was a Christian prayer gathering held in a football field.

## 'PATYGATE' SCANDAL IN UK

# MP's defection offers lifeline to PM Johnson

AFP, London

Allies of UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson closed ranks yesterday after a day of high drama prompted second thoughts among some Conservatives about dethroning their embattled leader.

One anti-Johnson plot by younger Tory MPs, livid at breaches of lockdowns by partying Downing Street staff, appeared to be fizzling out despite one senior backbencher telling him to his face to quit, "in the name of God".

Wednesday's defection of Conservative Christian Wakeford to Labour served as a reminder of the high stakes at play, with the opposition party surging in opinion polls.

"The prime minister is probably thanking Christian for what he did because it's made a lot of people think again, think twice," Tory MP Andrew Percy

told BBC radio.

"It's kind of made people a bit more relaxed, it's calmed nerves," he said.

"I think people have recognised that actually this constant navel gazing and internal debating is only to the advantage of our political opponents."

Before Wakeford's defection, the plotters appeared confident that they were close to the 54 letters needed to force a no-confidence vote in Johnson by Conservative MPs. But the secretive process remained on hold, with some rebels even withdrawing their letters in response to Wakeford joining Labour, according to reports.

Critics accuse Johnson of lying to parliament about what he knew and when, with regard to boozy parties held in Downing Street in apparent breach of his own government's Covid rules over the past two years.



Japan Air Self-Defense Forces's members stand in front of their C-130 Hercules carrying relief supplies to be deployed to Tonga, to help out the country devastated by a nearby eruption and tsunami, before it's take off at Komaki air base in Komaki, Japan, yesterday. The first humanitarian flights arrived in Tonga yesterday, five days after the dual disaster cut the Pacific kingdom off from the rest of the world.

PHOTO: REUTERS



We have been working overtime to try to understand what happened, who might be responsible and at the same time to do everything we can to care for our colleagues.... We will leave no stone unturned to get to the bottom of it.

US top diplomat Antony Blinken after CIA says mystery illness of US diplomats not a 'foreign plot'