

World sees 22pc drop in Covid cases in a week Deaths drop by 7pc

AFP, Paris

The Covid-19 pandemic continued its retreat this week, with fewer deaths and the number of new cases decreasing in most regions of the world.

After a surge which lasted for three and a-half months, the average number of global daily cases dropped for a third week in a row, falling back by 22 percent to 1.97 million, according to an AFP tally to Thursday.

The situation improved in most regions of the world over the past seven days. The number of daily cases dropped by 43 percent in the United States/Canada zone, by 35 percent in the Middle East, by 23 percent in Europe and the Latin America/Caribbean area and by 22 percent in Africa.

The situation remained almost stable in Asia, with a one percent fall in cases. They increased by the same amount in Oceania.

South East Asia and Oceania saw the biggest spike in the number of new cases this week.

The number of Covid-linked deaths declined by seven percent globally, with an average of 10,355 per day, after an increase for five weeks in a row.

Even though the highly contagious Omicron variant led at its peak to four times more daily infections than previous waves, daily deaths remain far lower than their record high in January 2021 when they skirted 15,000.

The US again mourned the most deaths this week with an average of 2,300 per day.



Rescuers worker at the scene of a giant landslide in Petropolis, Brazil. A desperate search was underway Friday for people buried by a deluge of mud that swept through the Brazilian city of Petropolis, leaving what President Jair Bolsonaro described as “scenes of war.” A total of 136 bodies have been retrieved to date, according to civil defense officials.

PHOTO: AFP

‘Moment of truth’ for Iran nuke talks: Scholz

AFP, Munich

The chances of reviving the Iran nuclear accord are dwindling and the “moment of truth” has arrived for Tehran’s leadership, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said yesterday.

“We now have the chance to reach an agreement that will allow sanctions to be lifted. But if we do not succeed very quickly, the negotiations risk failing,” Scholz told the Munich Security Conference.

“The Iranian leadership has a choice. Now is the moment of truth.”

The 2015 Iran nuclear agreement had offered Tehran sanctions relief in exchange for curbs on its nuclear programme, but the US unilaterally withdrew in 2018 under then-president Donald Trump and reimposed heavy economic sanctions.

This in turn prompted Iran to start ramping up its nuclear activities.

The outline of a new deal appears to be on the table in talks which have been held in Vienna since late November between signatories Britain,

China, France, Germany, Russia – and the United States indirectly.

A US State Department spokesperson told AFP on Thursday that “substantial progress has been made in the last week”.

“If Iran shows seriousness, we can and should reach an understanding on mutual return to full implementation of the JCPOA within days,” the spokesperson said, using an acronym for the 2015 deal.

But “anything much beyond that would put the possibility of return to the deal at grave risk,” the he added.

Experts believe Iran is only a few weeks away from having enough fissile material to build a nuclear weapon – even if it would take several more complicated steps to create an actual bomb.

President Joe Biden has said he is willing to return to the deal and ease some of the US sanctions, provided Tehran resumes its commitments under the agreement.

The Iranian foreign minister was due to address the Munich Security Conference later yesterday.



Storm Eunice kills 13 in Europe

AFP, London

Emergency crews yesterday battled to restore power to hundreds of thousands of homes in Britain after Storm Eunice carved a deadly trail across Western Europe and left transport networks in disarray.

At least 13 people were killed by falling trees, flying debris and high winds in Britain, Ireland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany and Poland, according to emergency services.

Train operators in Britain urged people not to travel, with timetables in chaos after most of the network was shut down when Eunice on Friday brought the largest wind gust ever recorded in England – 122 miles (196 kilometres) per hour.

The train network in the Netherlands was also paralysed, with no Eurostar and Thalys international services running from Britain and France after damage to overhead power lines.

France was also grappling with rail disruption, and about 75,000 households were without power.

The UK was worst hit by power cuts with nearly 400,000 homes cut off nationwide.

The Met Office, Britain’s meteorological service, issued a less severe “yellow” wind warning for much of the south coast of England and South Wales on Saturday, which it said “could hamper recovery efforts from Storm Eunice”.

Hundreds of flights were cancelled or delayed at London’s Heathrow and Gatwick airports and Schiphol in Amsterdam.

Semi-automatic rifle for kids!

AFP, Washington

A US gun manufacturer has unveiled a semi-automatic rifle for kids modeled on the AR-15, which has been used in a number of deadly mass shootings, sparking condemnation from gun safety groups. The gun dubbed the JR-15 is being marketed by maker WEEI Tactical as “the first in a line of shooting platforms that will safely help adults introduce children to the shooting sports.”

The company’s website says the rifle “also looks, feels, and operates just like Mom and Dad’s gun.”

The JR-15 is only 31 inches (80 centimeters) long, weighs less than 2.5 pounds (one kilogram) and comes with magazines of five or 10 rounds of 22 caliber bullets. It was released in mid-January with a price tag of \$389. The adult model, the AR-15, is the civilian version of a military-style weapon and has been used in multiple mass killings in the United States, including in schools.

In 2021, firearms killed nearly 45,000 people in the United States, including more than 1,500 minors, according to the organization Gun Violence Archive.

Dubai princess tells UN she is well

AFP, Geneva

An Emirati princess, who last year said she was being held “hostage” in a palace, has assured the UN rights chief Michelle Bachelet that she is well during a meeting in Paris, the High Commissioner said Friday. The meeting, which took place on an unspecified date at Dubai Sheikha Latifa’s request, took place a year after she said was being held hostage and feared for her life, in videos released by British media in February 2021.

“Latifa conveyed to the High Commissioner that she was well & expressed her wish for respect for her privacy,” UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Bachelet said in a tweet, which included a picture of the two women on a Paris street. Sheikha Latifa, 36-year-old daughter of Dubai’s ruler Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum, had said back in June last year that she was free to travel. Sheikh Mohammed is vice president and prime minister of the United Arab Emirates. Bachelet’s office, along with rights organisations had closely followed the matter and sought proof that the princes was still alive.



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