

# Biden to invest \$1.7 billion to fight COVID-19 variants

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Reuters

The Biden administration yesterday said it will invest \$1.7 billion to help states and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention fight COVID-19 variants that are rapidly spreading across the United States.

The investment, which will be part of President Joe Biden's \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan, will improve detection, monitoring, and mitigation of these variants by scaling up genomic sequencing efforts



- a key step in containing the spread, the White House said.

"The original strain of COVID-19 comprises only about half of all cases in America today. New and potentially dangerous strains of the virus make up the other half," the White House said in a statement.

In early February, US laboratories were only sequencing about 8,000 COVID-19 strains per week. Since then the ad-

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WHITE HOUSE

ministration has invested nearly \$200 million to increase genomic sequencing to 29,000 samples per week - an effort that will get a boost with the new funding.

The investment will be broken down into three areas: \$1 billion to expand genomic sequencing, \$400 million to help build six research centers for genomic epidemiology and \$300 million to build a national bioinformatics infrastructure - which will

help build a repository of data.

The first portion of the funding will be distributed in early May and the next round will be invested over the coming several years, the White House said.

The White House also offered a state-by-state breakdown of the funds with California receiving over \$17 million, Texas over \$15 million and Florida over \$12 million.

A White House official said on Thursday the United States is preparing for the possibility that a booster shot will be needed between nine to 12 months after people are initially vaccinated against COVID-19.

Also, Pfizer Inc Chief Executive Albert Bourla said people will "likely" need a third booster dose of COVID-19 vaccines within 12 months and could need annual shots.

The United States had administered 198,317,040 doses of COVID-19 vaccines in the country as of Thursday morning and distributed 255,400,665 doses, according to the CDC.

## EU drafts plan to delay decision on labelling gas a 'green' investment



An aerial picture shows the four natural-gas power plants "Gersteinwerk" of Germany's RWE Power, one of Europe's biggest electricity and gas companies near the North Rhine-Westphalian town of Hamm, Germany

Reuters | Brussels/London

The European Union plans to delay a decision on whether to label natural gas power plants as a sustainable investment in landmark green finance regulations due to be published next week, according to a draft document seen by Reuters.

The European Commission is due to publish on April 21 the first section of its "sustainable finance taxonomy," a long list of economic activities plus

the specific rules they must meet to be labeled as green investments in the EU.

Among the most contentious issues is whether to label natural gas, a fossil fuel, as green.

EU countries are split between those who say that would be greenwashing, and those who see gas as crucial for them to quit more-polluting coal.

The Commission looks set to delay a decision, after multiple draft proposals failed to bridge that divide.

## Gulf Air resumes direct flights to Istanbul



TDT | Manama

Gulf Air, the national carrier of the Kingdom of Bahrain, announced resuming its direct operations to Istanbul Airport in Turkey with 2 weekly flights starting from 11 May 2021.

Gulf Air has been operating direct flights between Bahrain and Turkey since 1985, and it is one of the airline's main regional destinations.

The airline currently flies to and from Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Kuwait, Riyadh, Jeddah, Dammam, Medina, Muscat, Cairo, Amman, Casablanca, London, Paris, Frankfurt, Athens, Bangkok, Manila, Singapore, Dhaka, Colombo, the Maldives and several destinations in India

and Pakistan.

The airline said it would also

boost its services and frequencies to its current network as follows: Cairo: From 6 weekly flights to daily flights, Dammam: From 6 weekly flights to double daily flights, Riyadh: From 5 weekly flights to daily flights, Jeddah: From 4 weekly flights to daily flights, Medina: From 3 to 5 weekly flights, Sialkot: Resumed with three weekly flights, Multan: Resumed with three weekly flights, Athens: From 2 to 3 weekly flights, Casablanca: From 1 to 2 weekly flights, Faisalabad: Resumed with two weekly flights, Manila: From 6 weekly flights to daily flights, and Dubai: From 18 to 21 weekly flights.

## Oil holds near \$67

Reuters

Oil held near \$67 a barrel yesterday and was heading for a weekly gain as a stronger demand outlook and signs of economic recovery in China and the United States offset rising COVID-19 infections in some other major economies.

Brent crude was down 8 cents, or 0.1%, at \$66.86 a barrel at 1340 GMT. It was heading for a weekly gain of 6.2% after rising in the past four sessions. US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude fell 10 cents, or 0.2%, to \$63.36. New US sanctions imposed on Russia, one of the world's top oil producers, over alleged election interference and hacking could also support prices.

## China GDP grows record 18.3% in first quarter in virus rebound

AFP News

China's economy expanded at a record pace in the first quarter as the country continued its rapid recovery from last year's pandemic-fueled slump, official data showed yesterday.

The 18.3% explosion in gross domestic product growth was the fastest pace since quarterly records began three decades ago, but came off a historic contraction in 2020 during the depths of the pandemic.

While the coronavirus first emerged in central China in late 2019, the country was also the quickest to bounce back after authorities imposed strict control measures and consumers stayed home.

"The national economy made a good start," National Bureau



Industrial output rose a less-than-estimated 24.5 percent in the quarter.

of Statistics spokeswoman Liu Aihua told reporters.

The sharp spike was partly due to "incomparable factors such as the low base figure of last year and increase of working days due to staff staying put during the Lunar New Year" holiday, said Liu.

Migrant workers were urged to remain in the areas where

they work during the break owing to fears that the annual massive migration might lead to local outbreaks.

On a quarterly basis, GDP rose 0.6% from the last quarter of 2020, slowing slightly, a shift analysts attributed to a wave of local virus outbreaks which triggered travel restrictions and lockdowns.

## Run out of milk? Robots on call for Singapore home deliveries

Reuters

Hoping to capitalise on a surge in demand for home deliveries, a Singapore technology company has deployed a pair of robots to bring residents their groceries in one part of the city state.

Developed by OTSAW Digital and both named "Camello", the robots' services have been offered to 700 households in a one-year trial.

Users can book delivery slots for their milk and eggs, and an app notifies them when the robot is about to reach a pick-up point - usually the lobby of an apartment building.

The robots, which are equipped with 3D sensors, a camera and two compartments each able to carry up to 20 kg (44 lb) of food or parcels ordered online, make four or five deliver-



ies per day on weekdays and are on call for half day on Saturday.

They use ultraviolet light to disinfect themselves after every trip, said OTSAW Digital's chief executive, Ling Ting Ming.

"Especially during this pandemic period, everybody is looking at contactless, humanless," he told Reuters.

For the time being, staff accompany the robots on their rounds to ensure no problems arise.

Tashfique Haider, a 25-year-old student who has tried out the service, said it could be particularly helpful for the elderly so they wouldn't have to carry goods home.

But a passerby worried the technology might be too much trouble for some.

"The younger customers will like it. I don't think they (the older generation) will, because these are gadgets that younger people like," said 36-year-old housewife Xue Ya Xin.

