

News in brief

US Capitol assault probe asks  
Ivanka Trump to cooperate



◆ Lawmakers investigating the 2021 US Capitol assault asked Donald Trump's daughter Ivanka Trump to cooperate with their inquiry, in a significant escalation of attempts to seek testimony from the inner circle of the former president. The House January 6 select committee told the 40-year-old businesswoman -- then a senior advisor to her father -- it had evidence that she had pleaded with him to call off the violence as his supporters stormed Congress.

◆ US President Joe Biden

Biden, Kishida agree to boost security, economic cooperation amid mounting concerns

and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida agreed in a virtual meeting yesterday to boost cooperation on pressing economic and security issues, including China, North Korea's missiles and Russia's aims in Ukraine.

The online meeting, the first substantial talks since Kishida became Japan's prime minister in October, followed "two-plus-two" discussions this month at which defense and foreign ministers from the longtime allies voiced strong concern about China's growing might and vowed to respond if necessary to destabilizing activity in the Indo-Pacific.



Germany wants to attract 400,000 skilled workers from abroad each year



◆ Germany's new coalition government wants to attract

400,000 qualified workers from abroad each year to tackle both a demographic imbalance and labour shortages in key sectors that risk undermining the recovery from the coronavirus pandemic.

"The shortage of skilled workers has become so serious by now that it is dramatically slowing down our economy," Christian Duerr, parliamentary leader of the co-governing Free Democrats (FDP), told business magazine WirtschaftsWoche.

◆ Scientists say the plant enset, an Ethiopian staple, could be a new superfood and a lifesaver in the face of climate change.

The banana-like crop has the potential to feed more than 100 million people in a warming world, according to a new study. The plant is almost unknown outside of Ethiopia, where it is used to make porridge and bread. Research suggests the crop can be grown over a much larger range in Africa.

False banana offers hope for warming world



US charges 2nd man in Haitian president's murder

◆ The US Justice Department charged a Haitian-Chilean man Thursday with conspiracy to commit murder for his role in the assassination of Haitian president Jovenel Moise last July. The charges were unveiled in federal court in Miami against Rodolphe Jaar, 49, after he was arrested in the Dominican Republic and transferred Monday to the United States. An FBI affidavit filed in the case said that, in an interview in December, Jaar admitted that he had provided guns and ammunition to the group of Colombians who carried out the murder.

COVID-19: Countries worst affected

	Country	Total cases	Total deaths	Global tally
1	USA	70,544,862	883,903	344,502,993
2	India	38,566,027	488,422	
3	Brazil	23,588,921	622,251	Deaths
4	UK	15,709,059	153,490	
5	France	15,600,647	128,114	5,597,102
6	Russia	10,987,774	324,752	Recovered:
7	Turkey	10,808,770	85,600	275,677,283
8	Italy	9,597,362	142,963	New cases
9	Spain	8,834,363	91,599	
10	Germany	8,522,046	117,210	+1,449,017
11	Argentina	7,576,335	118,809	New deaths
12	Iran	6,241,843	132,172	
13	Colombia	5,655,026	131,627	+4,108
14	Mexico	4,545,683	302,390	

Middle East

Figures as of closing

Country	Total cases	new cases	Total deaths	New Deaths	Total recovered	Active cases
Egypt	405,393		22,260		339,259	43,874
Saudi Arabia	643,211	+4,884	8,916	+2	590,140	44,155
UAE	819,866	+2,921	2,207	+3	765,982	51,677
Kuwait	484,150		2,482		436,838	44,830
Oman	318,272		4,125		303,644	10,503
Qatar	317,277	+3,204	632		275,813	40,832

## US and Russia try to lower temperature in Ukraine crisis

● Blinken, Lavrov describe talks as 'frank', voice hope for lowering temperature

AFP | Geneva

Washington and Moscow's top diplomats agreed yesterday to keep working to ease tensions over Ukraine, with the United States promising a written response to Russian security demands and not ruling out a presidential meeting.

As fears grow that Russia could invade its pro-Western neighbour, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken renewed warnings of severe Western reprisals as he met for 90 minutes with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Geneva.

But Blinken described the high-stakes talks as "frank" and not "polemical", with Lavrov also voicing hope for a lowering of the temperature between the former Cold War foes.

Russia has massed tens of thousands of troops on the Ukrainian border, denying it plans to invade but demanding security guarantees, including a permanent ban on the country joining NATO.

Blinken said that Washington will share written ideas with Russia next week in which it will also make clear its own positions.

"We didn't expect any major breakthroughs to happen today, but I believe we are now on a clear path in terms of understanding each other's concerns and each other's positions," Blinken told reporters.

"We anticipate that we will be able to share with Russia our concerns and ideas in more detail in writing next week and we agreed to further discussions after that," he added.

Speaking separately to reporters, Lavrov also said he was promised the written responses next week.

"Antony Blinken agreed that we need to have a reasonable dialogue, and I hope emotions will decrease," he said.

"I cannot say whether or not



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, left, shakes hands with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov before their meeting

“We didn't expect any major breakthroughs to happen today, but I believe we are now on a clearer path to understanding each other's positions

SERGEI LAVROV

we are on the right track. We will know when we get an answer."

He added that another meeting could be held between the two, but that it was "premature" to start talking about another summit between Presidents Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin, who met in Geneva last June.

Blinken, however, did not rule out fresh talks between the presidents after Biden twice warned Putin by telephone of consequences for any Ukraine invasion.

"If we conclude (and) the Russians conclude that the best way to resolve things is through a further conversation between them, we're certainly prepared to do that," Blinken said.

Biden bluntly assessed on Wednesday that Putin is likely to "move in" on Ukraine and warned of a "disaster for Russia".

Cold War redux?

Russia, which already fuels a deadly insurgency in eastern Ukraine that has killed more than 13,000 people since 2014, has demanded guarantees that NATO never admit the former Soviet republic or expand

otherwise in Moscow's old sphere.

The United States has declared the idea a "non-starter" and accused Russia of undermining Europe's post-Cold War order by bullying another country into submission.

Russia yesterday reiterated demands for the "withdrawal of foreign forces, hardware and arms" from countries that were not NATO members before 1997, this time singling out Bulgaria and Romania, two former Warsaw Pact countries that joined NATO in 2004.

Romania's foreign ministry quickly hit back, saying the demand "is unacceptable and cannot be part of a negotiation".

Blinken headed to Geneva after a solidarity trip to Kyiv and talks with Britain, France and Germany in Berlin.

Even while rejecting the core Russian demands, the Biden administration has said it is willing to speak to Moscow about its security concerns.

One proposal by the United States is to revive restrictions on missiles in Europe that had been set by the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, a Cold War deal trashed by former president Donald Trump's administration as it accused Moscow of violations.

The Biden administration has also offered more transparency on military exercises.

Russia has not rejected the proposals but says that its core concern is Ukraine and on Thursday announced massive naval drills in the Atlantic, Pacific, Arctic and Mediterranean as a show of force.

## Massiv

### Road accident in west

● Investigators say explosive-laden truck collided with motorcycle

AFP | Accra

At least 1 people were killed and 59 injured Thursday in a devastating explosion in a western Ghana town after a truck carrying explosives intended for a mine collided with a motorcycle, the government said.

The blast left a huge crater and reduced dozens of buildings to dust-covered piles of wood and metal in Apiate, near the city of Bogoso some 300 kilometres (180 miles) west of the mineral-rich West African country's capital Accra.

Footage verified by AFP showed locals rushing towards a raging fire and rising plumes of black smoke to inspect the damage, while rescue workers waded through the rubble to find survivors caught in the devastation and retrieve lifeless bodies.

"A total of 13 people have unfortunately been confirmed dead, and 59 injured people have been rescued," Information Minister Kojo Oppong Nkrumah said in a statement released overnight.

The minister said initial signs point to "an accident involving

## New Zealand in Tonga as

Reuters | Wellington

Life-saving water supplies from a New Zealand navy ship were distributed across Tonga's main island yesterday, as other countries battled the logistics of delivering aid to one of the world's remotest communities.

Six days after the South Pacific archipelago was devastated by a volcanic eruption and tsunami that deposited a blanket of ash and polluted its water sources, the HMNZS Aotearoa docked in the capital, Nuku'alofa.

The ship carried 250,000 litres of water and desalination equipment able to produce 70,000 litres more per day, New Zealand's High Commission said.

"Trucks ... have begun collecting and delivering water supplies from Aotearoa," the Commission said on its Facebook page.

The first flights from Australia and New Zealand landed on Thursday with some water as well as shelter, communication equipment and generators.

On Thursday, an Australian flight was forced to return to base because of a positive COVID-19 case onboard, while yesterday technical problems delayed one of two Japanese C-130 transporters carrying 5,000 litres of drinking water, Japan's Self-Defence Forces said.

Underlining the complexity of mounting a contactless international aid operation to one of the few countries free of COVID-19, the Australian plane was turned

## Security beefed up in Pakistan capital after deadly Lahore blast

AFP | Lahore

Security was beefed up across Pakistan's capital yesterday, police said, a day after three people were killed and 22 wounded by a bomb in the eastern megacity of Lahore.

The country has suffered a string of blasts and attacks since December, when a truce between the government and Pakistan's Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) lapsed.

But Thursday's bomb blast -- in a busy shopping district of Lahore -- was claimed by the Baloch Nationalist Army (BNA), the newest of several separatist groups to emerge from Paki-



Police officers stand guard as ambulances prepare to transport any injured people from the site of a bomb explosion, in Lahore

stan's biggest but poorest province, Balochistan.

Police spokesman Naeem Iqbal said that security would

be tightened in Islamabad, the seat of the government and home to dozens of embassies and other international institutions.

He said uniformed and plain-clothes officers would fan across the city, particularly in crowded areas such as markets.

Earlier this week a policeman was killed and two others wounded in a drive-by motorcycle shooting in the capital by two TTP militants who died in return fire.

The BNA said it carried out Thursday's Lahore bomb attack "in response to the killing of women and children by Pakistani forces in Balochistan".