

News in brief

US, Mexico, Guatemala bar migrant caravans, citing Covid



The United States, Mexico and Guatemala agreed to bar migrant caravans from passing through their territories due to the Covid pandemic, days after one from Honduras was violently broken up in Guatemala. US Ambassador to Guatemala William Popp stressed that any migrants who cross the US border in an irregular manner will be returned home immediately, citing national health security.

The World Health Organization said it had no plans to change its guidance recommending fabric facemasks as new coronavirus variants spread, because the mutated strains are transmitted in the same way.

WHO says fabric facemasks still work against virus variants

Germany and Austria have made medical masks mandatory on public transport and in shops -- allowing only surgical or FFP2 masks, rather than fabric -- amid concerns over the threat posed by the rapidly-spreading new virus mutations.



N Korea sees talks as way to advance nuclear program, says US intel official



The top US intelligence officer for North Korea warned the country sees diplomacy only as a means to advance its nuclear weapons development, even as the new Biden administration says it will look for ways to bring Pyongyang back to talks. President Joe Biden's nominee for secretary of state, Antony Blinken, said on Tuesday the new administration planned a full review of the US approach to North Korea to look at ways to increase pressure on it to return to the negotiating table.

Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador said he and his US counterpart Joe Biden discussed migration, the COVID-19 pandemic and bilateral cooperation during their first phone call since the American assumed the presidency this week.

US, Mexican presidents talk migration, coronavirus after nagging tensions

The afternoon call was "pleasant and respectful" Lopez Obrador said in a brief Twitter post, in which he appeared in a photo smiling, seated at a table with Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard and former presidential chief of staff Alfonso Romo.



Two senior British parliamentarians called for an investigation into a British-registered company possibly linked to last year's devastating explosion in Beirut, after Reuters found that the firm had not disclosed its beneficial owners. The company, Savaro Ltd, is registered at a London address, and like all British firms is required to list who owns it with Britain's companies register, known as Companies House.

Russia arrests Navalny supporters at rally

Police arrest over 1,500 at Russia protests backing jailed Kremlin foe Navalny

Supporters of the jailed opposition leader demand his release, defying bitter cold and a ban on protests

Reuters | Moscow



Police detain a man during a protest against the jailing of opposition leader Alexei Navalny in People gather in St.Petersburg, Russia

Police detained over 1,500 people and used force to break up rallies around Russia yesterday as tens of thousands of protesters demanded the release of Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny, whose wife was among those detained.

Navalny had called on his supporters to protest after being arrested last weekend as he returned to Russia from Germany for the first time since being poisoned with a nerve agent he says was applied to his underpants by state security agents in August.

The authorities had warned people to stay away from yesterday's protests, saying they risked catching COVID-19 as well as prosecution and possible jail time for attending an unauthorised event.

But protesters defied the ban and bitter cold, and turned out in force.

In central Moscow, where Reuters reporters estimated at least 40,000 people had gathered in one of the biggest unauthorised

rallies for years, police were seen roughly detaining people, bundling them into nearby vans.

The authorities said just some 4,000 people had shown up. The foreign ministry questioned Reuters' crowd estimate, using sarcasm to suggest it was too high.

"Why not just immediately say 4 million?" it quipped on its official Telegram messenger channel. Some protesters chanted "Putin is a thief", and "Disgrace" and "Freedom to Navalny!"

Navalny's wife Yulia said on social media she had been detained at the rally. She was later released.

Some of Navalny's political al-

lies were detained in the days before the protest; others on the day itself.

The OVD-Info protest monitor group said that at least 1,614 people, including 513 in Moscow and 212 in St Petersburg, had been detained across Russia.

It reported arrests at rallies in nearly 70 towns and cities.

Navalny, a 44-year-old lawyer, is in a Moscow prison pending the outcome of four legal matters he describes as trumped up. He accuses President Vladimir Putin of ordering his attempted murder. Putin has dismissed that, alleging Navalny is part of a U.S.-backed

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Navalny, who is President Vladimir Putin's most prominent and durable foe, was arrested on Jan. 17 when he returned to Moscow from Germany, where he had spent five months recovering from a severe nerve-agent poisoning that he blames on the Kremlin

dirty tricks campaign to discredit him.

One Moscow protester, Sergei Radchenko, 53, said: "I'm tired of being afraid. I haven't just turned up for myself and Navalny, but for my son because there is no future in this country."

He added that he was frightened but felt strongly about what he called an out of control judicial system.

There was no immediate comment from the Kremlin, which had previously called the protests illegal and the work of "provocateurs".

COVID-19: Countries worst affected

Country	Total cases	Total deaths
1 USA	25,471,879	425,894
2 India	10,654,744	153,365
3 Brazil	8,768,280	215,513
4 Russia	3,698,273	68,971
5 UK	3,617,459	97,329
6 France	3,011,257	72,647
7 Spain	2,603,472	55,441
8 Italy	2,455,185	85,162
9 Turkey	2,424,328	24,933
10 Germany	2,130,499	52,198
11 Colombia	1,987,418	50,586
12 Argentina	1,853,830	46,575
13 Mexico	1,732,290	147,614
14 Poland	1,470,879	35,253

Global tally
99,065,048

Deaths
2,123,897

Recovered:
71,189,591

New cases
+345,602

New deaths
+9,003

Figures as of closing

Middle East

Country	Total cases	New cases	Total deaths	New Deaths	Total recovered	Active cases
Egypt	160,463		8,853		125,603	26,007
Saudi Arabia	366,185	+197	6,350	+4	357,728	2,107
UAE	274,376	+3,566	783	+7	247,318	26,275
Kuwait	118,531	+813	721	+7	109,916	7,894
Oman	132,486		1,517		124,730	6,239
Qatar	148,772	+251	248		144,740	3,784

Biden administration to review US-Taliban withdrawal deal

AFP | Washington

The Biden administration said it will review a landmark US deal with the Taliban, focusing on whether the insurgent group has reduced attacks in Afghanistan, in keeping with its side of the agreement.

Washington struck a deal with the Taliban in Qatar last year, to begin withdrawing its troops in return for security guarantees from the militants and a commitment to kickstart peace talks with the Afghan government.

But violence across Afghanistan has surged despite the two sides engaging in those talks since September.

President Joe Biden's newly appointed national security advisor, Jake Sullivan, spoke with his Afghan counterpart Hamdullah Mohib and "made clear the United States' intention to review" the deal, said National Security Council spokeswoman Emily Horne late Friday.

Johnson says UK virus strain more deadly

AFP | London

The coronavirus strain that has swept Britain and beyond in recent months could be more deadly as well as more transmissible, Prime Minister Boris Johnson said.

The sobering news came as the UK sees record deaths from Covid-19, following a surge in cases and hospitalisations since the variant was first identified in south-east England in September.

The strain has also spread to more than 60 nations -- including China, where the pandemic began more than a year ago -- according to the World Health Organization (WHO).

"In addition to spreading more quickly, it also now appears that there is some evidence that the new variant... may be associated with a higher degree of mortality," Johnson said at a news conference.

He blamed the variant for the grim situation engulfing Britain, where another 1,401 fatalities were announced Friday, taking the overall toll to 95,981 -- the highest in Europe.

Virus deaths have risen 16 percent over the past week, while the number of people hospitalised with Covid-19 is approaching double the number seen during the worst days of the first wave of the pandemic in April.



A member of the public gets a coronavirus COVID-19 test in London

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BORIS JOHNSON

around these numbers and we need more work to get a precise handle on it, but it obviously is of concern," he said, flanking Johnson in Downing Street.

"You will see that across the different age groups as well, a similar sort of relative increase in the risk."

However Mike Ryan, executive director of the WHO's health emergencies programme, said it had not yet seen evidence that the variant is more lethal.

"What we are seeing is that if you infect more people, more people will get very sick, and if more people get very sick more people will die," he added.

"Increasing incidence leads to higher mortality."

Chief government scientist Patrick Vallance said the new variant could be 30-40 percent more deadly for some age groups, although he stressed the assessment relied on sparse data.

"There's a lot of uncertainty