

China latest of 60 nations with UK virus strain as US to rejoin WHO

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1.6 million residents have banned from leaving Beijing as two Covid-19 cases linked to the UK virus variant were found

China confirmed Wednesday that it had detected the UK variant of the coronavirus, joining at least 60 other countries, as US President-elect Joe

Biden's incoming administration committed to rejoining the World Health Organisation.

COVID-19 has claimed more than two million lives globally since it was first detected in the Chinese city of Wuhan more than a year ago, while the [total number](#) of reported cases is edging towards 100 million, according to an AFP tally.

The arrival of mass inoculation drives in the United States, Europe and Asia had brought hope that the end of the epidemic was in sight.

The latest good news on that front came from India, which on Wednesday exported its first batch of locally produced [coronavirus](#) shots.

The "Pharmacy of the World will deliver to overcome the COVID challenge", Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar tweeted, as India promised supplies to several other countries in the region.

More than 51 million vaccines have now been given out around the world, according to an AFP count, but the WHO has warned that [rich countries](#) are hogging most of the doses.

Israel has vaccinated the highest percentage of its population by far, while the United States has administered the most shots, followed by China and the UK.

But the WHO warned Wednesday that more than 60 countries were now grappling with the UK strain—and that 23 countries and territories had reported the South African variant, both of which are believed to be more infectious.



Biden's aides says his administration would immediately reverse Trump's decision to leave the WHO

The number of new deaths worldwide climbed to a record high of 93,000 over the previous week, it added, with 4.7 million new cases reported over the same period.

Concern over the new variants has triggered governments around the world to toughen constraints on restriction-weary populations as officials grapple with how to slow infections until vaccines become widely available.

Biden to change tack

In the US, by far the worst-hit nation with more than 400,000 deaths, Biden focused on healing at a memorial for victims on the eve of his inauguration.

"Let us shine the lights in the darkness along the sacred pool of reflection and remember all who we lost," Biden said at Washington's National Mall reflecting pool, where lights were turned on as a memorial to those who have died.

On Wednesday Biden's aides said his administration would immediately reverse Trump's decision to leave the WHO.

Coronavirus variants

Mutations are natural and to be expected in any virus. Several variants of SARS-CoV-2 have been detected

Three variants of high interest

<p>UK variant: VOC 202012/01 a.k.a B117</p>  <p>Reported to the WHO: December 14</p> <p>Earliest appearance: traced to Kent in September</p> <p>Responsible for more than 50% of cases in southeast England from October to December.</p> <p>Now detected dozens of countries worldwide</p>	<p>South African variant: 501.V2</p>  <p>Reported to the WHO: December 18</p> <p>Earliest appearance: South Africa in October</p> <p>Starting in S. Africa's Eastern Cape, Western Cape, before largely replacing other variants in SA.</p> <p>Now detected in several countries worldwide</p>	<p>Japan variant: B.1.1.248</p>  <p>Reported to the WHO: January 10</p> <p>Earliest appearance: January 2 in Japan</p> <p>Found in two adults and two children who arrived in Japan from Brazil</p>
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Source: [cdc.gov/science/mediacentre.org/cidrap.umn.edu/WHO.int/sciencenews.org/](https://www.cdc.gov/science/mediacentre/org/cidrap.umn.edu/WHO.int/sciencenews.org/)
Birmingham Uni Turnkey lab/ NERVTAG/Imperial College London

AFP 

Coronavirus variants

Jeff Zients, the new president's point-man for fighting the pandemic,

said Biden would also establish an office of COVID-19 response inside the White House.

"America's withdrawal from the international arena has impeded progress on the global response and left us more vulnerable to future pandemics," Zients said.

He added that leading US coronavirus expert Anthony Fauci will lead a delegation to take part in the WHO Executive Board meeting on Thursday.

Beijing lockdown

In China, 1.6 million residents were banned from leaving Beijing on Wednesday as two COVID-19 cases linked to the UK virus variant were found in the capital.

The country is battling its largest resurgence in nearly a year, although the official figures are startlingly low compared to the rest of the world: just seven cases were reported in Beijing on Wednesday.



In Washington, the lights of the Reflecting Pool were turned on in tribute to American victims of the pandemic

Authorities ordered residents of the southern Beijing district of Daxing—which covers one of the city's two international airports—to remain indoors.

But in Wuhan, the city of 11 million people now synonymous with the coronavirus, wet markets thronged with shoppers, elderly dancers rehearsed in the parks, and bars sold "Wuhan Stay Strong" craft beer.

"Wuhan had a tough year in 2020," Wang Chen, a 20-year-old resident, told AFP outside the exhibition, adding that China "handled the crisis very well."

Olympic spirit

Despite mounting case numbers, organisers of the postponed Tokyo 2020 Olympics said they are "unwavering" on holding the event this year.

Ahead of the six-month countdown, Games CEO Toshiko Muto told AFP the sporting showpiece was still possible, but conceded people were "anxious" with Tokyo under a state of emergency.



A partial lockdown was imposed on Beijing on Wednesday, with 1.6 million residents banned from leaving the city



Biden is set to overrule President Donald Trump's decision to lift a travel ban on Brazil and European nations designed to stop the spread of the virus

"We are not discussing cancellation," he said, while admitting organisers couldn't rule out staging the event without spectators.

Meanwhile, on the Indonesian resort island of Bali, dozens of foreigners caught without masks have been subjected to an unusual punishment—push-ups in the street.

Video footage showed people in T-shirts and shorts doing the vigorous exercise on pavements in the sweltering tropical heat, as masked security officials stood over them.

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