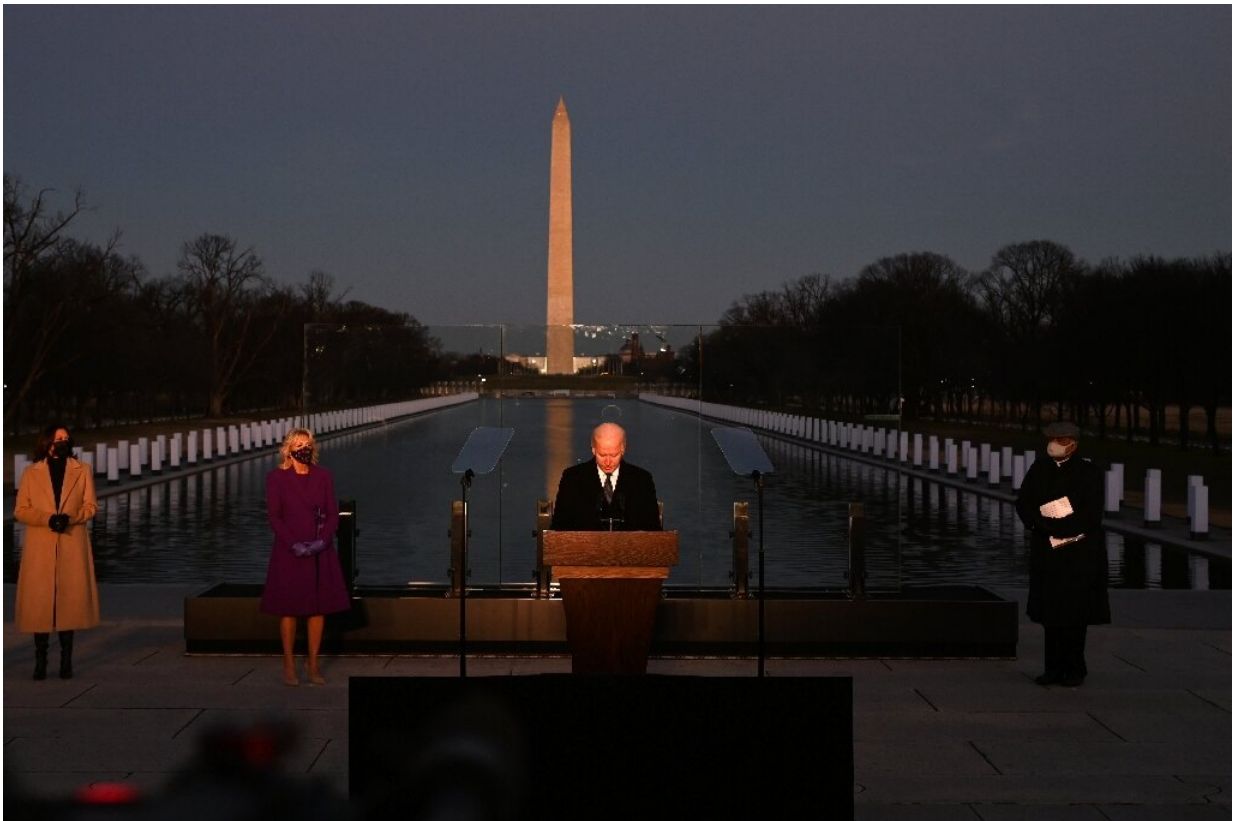


US resumes WHO support, launches \$1.9 trillion virus plan

January 21 2021, by Nina Larson With Afp Bureaus



Joe Biden, a fierce critic of his predecessor's approach to the virus, launched a massive plan to get the contagion under control on his first day in office

The United States on Thursday said it would resume its funding for the UN's health agency as President Joe Biden shifts towards greater

international cooperation in the fight against COVID-19, while also launching a \$1.9 trillion plan to tackle the pandemic at home.

On his first day in the job, Biden confirmed he had reversed the decision of former president Donald Trump to quit the World Health Organization (WHO).

And on Day Two, Biden's chief medical adviser Anthony Fauci confirmed that the US would continue its hefty payments into the organisation's budget, prompting a wave of relief among international health experts.

"Under trying circumstances, this organisation has rallied the scientific and research and development community to accelerate vaccines, therapies and diagnostics," Fauci told a WHO meeting via video-link.

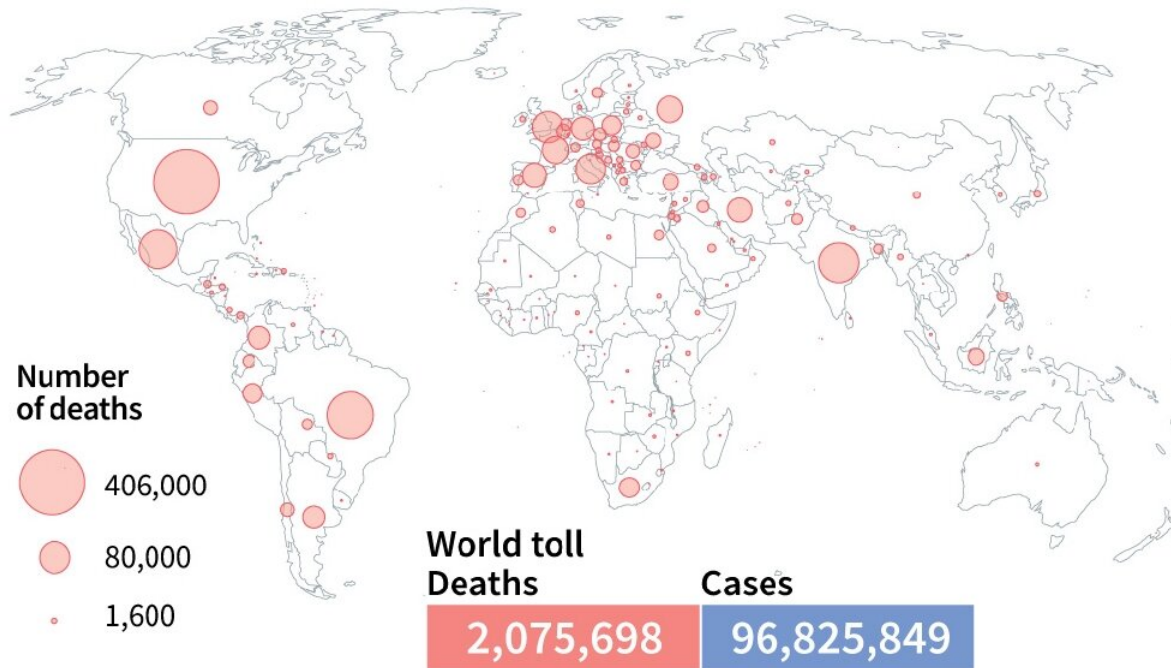
Biden was a fierce critic of Trump's approach to tackling the virus in the US, which with more than 400,000 people dead is the world's worst-hit nation.

The new president is seeking to vaccinate 100 million people in 100 days, increase the use of masks and testing, expand the public health workforce and offer more emergency relief to those struggling with the restrictions.

"For almost a year now, Americans could not look to the federal government for any strategy," said Jeff Zients, coordinator of the new COVID-19 task force. "As president Biden steps into office today, that all changes."

Spread of the coronavirus

As of January 21, 1100 GMT



Source: AFP tallies based on official tolls



World map showing the number of Covid-19 deaths by country, as of Jan 21 at 1100 GMT

With infection rates spiralling and vaccine campaigns still in their infancy—and with the global death toll now past two million— countries from Lebanon to Sierra Leone were tightening restrictions Thursday.

In hard-hit Europe, the Dutch parliament approved an overnight curfew as EU ministers mulled internal border closures, although Russian capital Moscow announced it was lifting many of its harshest restrictions as Mayor Sergei Sobyenin expressed "cautious optimism" over the current figures.

Gasping for breath

In northwest Brazil, however, hospitals were battling dire shortages of oxygen and hospital beds.

Health workers described harrowing scenes, with patients dying gasping for breath due to the lack of available oxygen.

"As soon as they unload the oxygen, we start worrying where the next day's supply will come from. It is a constant stress," said one hospital staffer.

More contagious coronavirus variants have travelled quickly around the globe—including from Brazil—tempering optimism that mass vaccination campaigns would bring a swift end to the worst phase of the pandemic.



China has locked down millions as it battles its first significant outbreak in months

The European Centre for Disease Prevention, the EU's disease agency, on Thursday urged countries to prepare more stringent measures and speed up vaccine campaigns in the coming weeks because of the risks posed by potent new strains.

But the WHO has repeatedly warned that richer countries are hogging the vaccine—and they are paying less for their doses, after negotiating favourable deals with manufacturers.

South Africa, for example, will pay 2.5 times more than most European countries for each Oxford-AstraZeneca shot, the South African health

ministry has confirmed.

The US provided a boost to efforts to share out vaccines across the world, however, by announcing it intends to join the Covax initiative, a pool of doses supplied by countries and companies.

Glastonbury cancelled again

In Japan, questions are intensifying about the viability of hosting the Tokyo Olympic Games in six months' time—an event which would require thousands of athletes to fly in from around the world.

Olympic chief Thomas Bach said there was "no reason whatsoever" to believe the games would not go ahead, adding: "This is why there is no plan B and this is why we are fully committed to make these games safe and successful."



Africa's second wave is proving more deadly than the first as spiking cases overwhelm hospitals

But many organisers of large-scale events are already grappling with the reality that the return to pre-pandemic normality may come later than previously hoped.

The Swiss edition of international art fair Art Basel has been postponed from June until September, while Britain's storied Glastonbury music festival was axed for another year.

Britain is facing record daily death tolls and has rammed through the approval of several vaccines, betting heavily on the jabs as an ultimate solution to the contagion.

But the same urgency is not being felt everywhere.

The Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan plans to vaccinate its entire population, but not until after March 13 because the period before has been deemed "inauspicious".

The shots will start after that, the prime minister's office said, adding that it was "important we roll out the nationwide vaccination on an auspicious date".

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