

WHO says UK strain in over 60 countries as Biden mourns COVID victims

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President-elect Joe Biden (R) and incoming First Lady Jill Biden watch as a Covid-19 memorial is lit in Washington, DC

The UK coronavirus strain has spread to at least 60 countries, the World Health Organization reported Wednesday, after US President-elect Joe

Biden led a moving tribute to American victims.

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.

But deep concern over new variants of the deadly pathogen 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.

In its weekly update, the WHO announced the strain first found in the UK was now in 10 more countries than seven days ago.

It said the South African variant—which similarly is believed to be more transmissible—has been reported in 23 countries and territories.

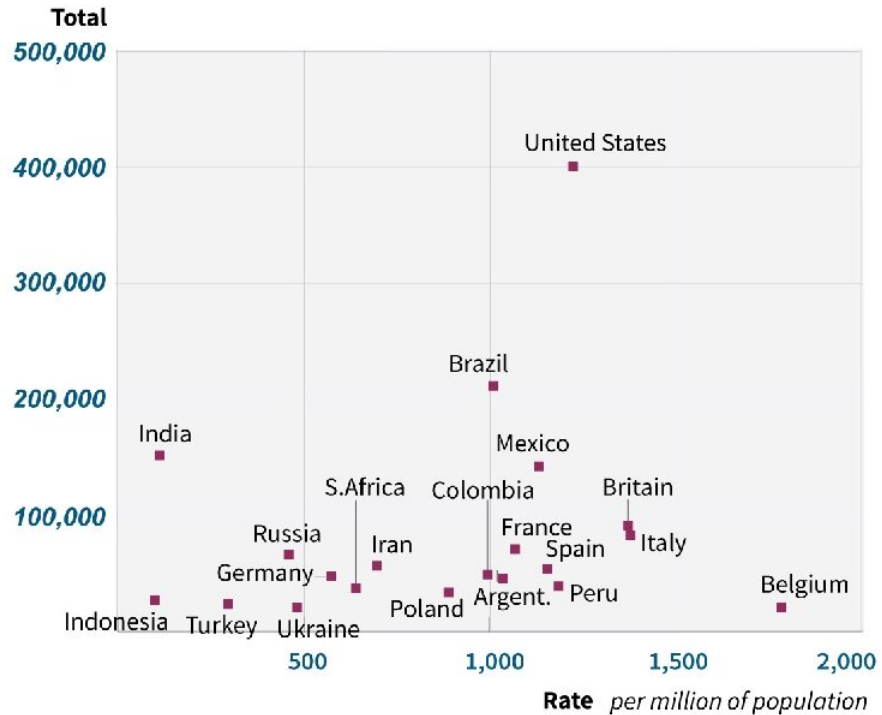
The number of new deaths climbed to a record high of 93,000 over the previous week, it added, with 4.7 million new cases reported over the same period.

Covid-19: Total deaths vs deaths per million

As of January 19

Highest number

	Total deaths	Per million
US	401,300+	1,223
Brazil	211,400+	1,009
India	152,500+	113
Mexico	142,800+	1,132
Britain	91,400+	1,372
Italy	83,100+	1,378
France	71,400+	1,067
Russia	66,600+	461
Iran	56,900+	696
Spain	54,100+	1,154
Colombia	49,400+	995
Germany	47,600+	574
Argentina	46,000+	1,035
Peru	39,000+	1,184
S. Africa	38,200+	642
Poland	33,600+	890
Indonesia	26,500+	99
Turkey	24,300+	297
Ukraine	21,000+	481
Belgium	20,400+	1,786



AFP  Source: AFP database

Graphic looking at countries with the highest coronavirus death tolls, and their respective death rates.

Biden leads tributes

The US is by far the worst-hit nation with more than 400,000 deaths, and incoming Commander-in-Chief Biden focused on healing at a memorial for victims on the eve of his inauguration.

Almost a year after the US registered its first fatality, the pace of the pandemic has picked up with 100,000 deaths in the past month alone.

"It's hard sometimes to remember, but that's how we heal. It's important

to do that as a nation," Biden said in sombre remarks on Tuesday in Washington at the National Mall reflecting pool, where lights were turned on as a memorial to those who have died.

"Let us shine the lights in the darkness along the sacred pool of reflection and remember all who we lost," Biden said.

The President-elect has made tackling the pandemic his top priority, as he prepares to take office in Washington on Wednesday.

He is already being forced to take action, with his aides contradicting an order from outgoing President Donald Trump to lift travel bans to Europe and Brazil designed to stop the spread.



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

Beijing lockdown

In China, which has largely brought the virus under control, a partial lockdown was imposed on the capital Beijing on Wednesday, with 1.6 million residents banned from leaving the city.

The country is battling its largest resurgence of COVID-19 cases 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.

Authorities ordered residents of the southern Beijing district of Daxing—which includes 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](#), there were scenes of relaxation and travel freedoms this week.

Wet markets throng with shoppers, elderly dancers rehearse in the parks, and bars sell "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."



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

Olympic spirit

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

In an interview with AFP ahead of the six-month countdown, Games CEO Toshiro Muto insisted the sporting showpiece was still possible, but conceded people are "anxious", including in Japan where Tokyo is under a state of emergency.

"We are not discussing cancellation," he said, while admitting organisers

couldn't rule out staging the event without spectators.

"Holding the Games is our unwavering policy, and at this point in time we're not discussing anything other than that."

However, his view was in contrast to that of a senior official from the London 2012 Games Keith Mills, who told the BBC Tokyo officials should be making plans to cancel.

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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