

US virus deaths top WWII fatalities as Biden warns worst yet to come

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The new "first family" of the United States pose in front of a statue of Abraham Lincoln while wearing face masks following Joe Biden's inauguration

New US President Joe Biden warned the worst of the pandemic is still to come, as the number of American coronavirus deaths surpassed the

country's troop fatalities in World War II.

Coronavirus cases have surged past 96 million worldwide, fuelled by the emergence of new variants including one that was first detected in Britain and has now spread to more than 60 nations, the World Health Organization said Wednesday.

The United States remains the worst-hit country, with around a fifth of the two million global COVID-19 deaths, and Biden has made the fight against the pandemic his administration's top priority.

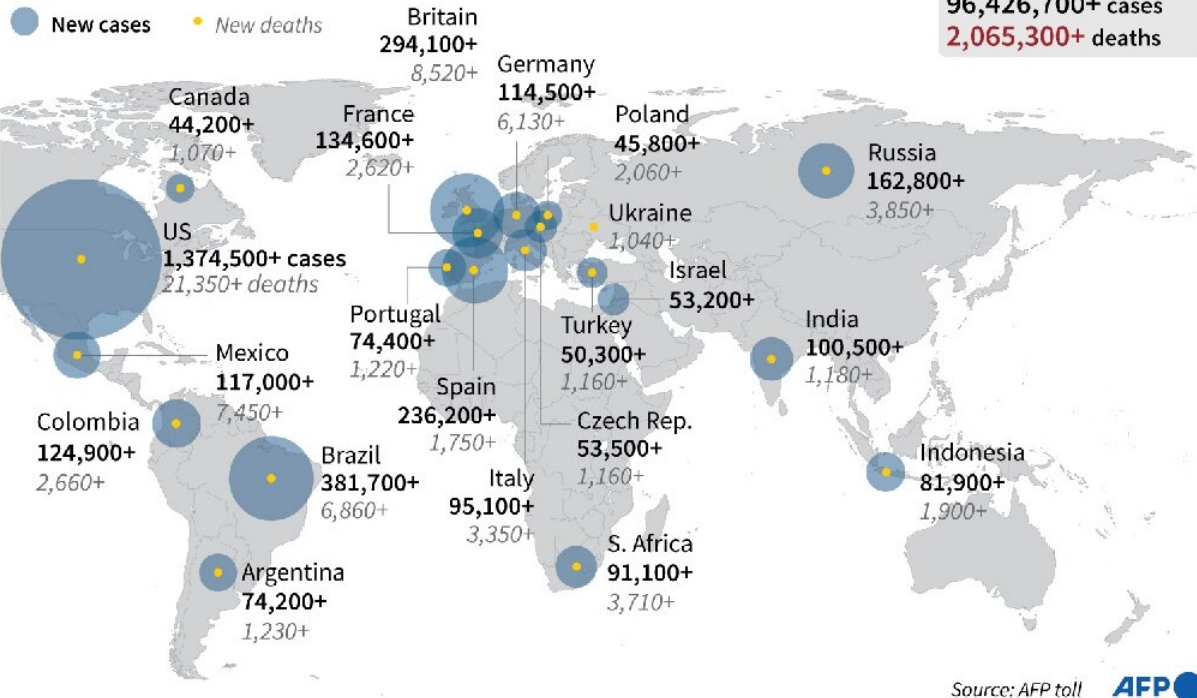
"We need all our strength to persevere through this dark winter. We're entering what may be the toughest and deadliest period of the virus," Biden said at his inauguration, where those in attendance wore face masks and social distancing was enforced.

A Johns Hopkins University tracker on Wednesday showed that 405,400 people have died from the disease, more than the 405,399 total US combat and non-combat deaths in WWII.

Among the Biden administration's targets is to inoculate 100 million Americans in 100 days, hoping to revive a vaccine rollout that had floundered in the last weeks of the Trump presidency.

One week of new Covid-19 cases

Selected countries, Jan 14 - 20



Graphic highlighting the countries with the largest number of Covid-19 cases and deaths in the past week.

E-commerce titan Amazon on Wednesday offered its vast logistics infrastructure to help with that effort.

Biden's point-man for fighting the pandemic, Jeff Zients, said the US would also rejoin the WHO, reversing his predecessor's decision.

He added that top US expert Anthony Fauci would lead a delegation to the WHO executive board meeting on Thursday.

'A war zone'

The announcement came as the WHO confirmed that the virus variant first detected in Britain had spread to more than 60 countries, while one that emerged in South Africa has made it to 23.

The South African variant is more contagious than earlier ones, experts have warned.

Both have tempered optimism that [mass vaccination](#) will help to end the unpopular restrictions such as shutdowns that have wrecked economies around the world.

There was some good news, however, with early results from two studies on the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine showing it is effective against the British variant, which is fuelling a surge that has overwhelmed UK hospitals.



Paramedics take a man showing symptoms of COVID-19 to hospital near Pretoria in South Africa. A new strain of the virus that emerged in the country is already spreading around the world

"When you go into a hospital... in some cases it looks like a war zone," the British government's chief scientist, Patrick Vallance, told Sky News.

Britain is mounting a massive vaccination drive, that has involved the repurposing of all kinds of large buildings—including Salisbury Cathedral, where thousands of [elderly people](#) are receiving shots.

Two musicians worked in shifts throughout the day on its 19th-century organ, playing soothing pieces by composers including Bach and Dvorak.

"It's quite a scary thing to be going through—the thought of the disease and what it can do to families and people," said Jeanie Grant, who had brought her 98-year-old father to the cathedral for his shot.

"(So) to actually come to a building that has seen so much history and is still serving a beautiful purpose for the community, I think it's very special."



A temporary vaccination centre has been set up inside Salisbury Cathedral in southwest England, with musicians playing the 19th-century organ to soothe the nerves of those waiting for their shots



People in masks maintain social distancing as they queue to buy groceries in Thimphu, Bhutan. The Himalayan kingdom says it will only start vaccinating citizens on an "auspicious" date

'No one needs to panic'

There are concerns, however, that rich nations are hogging doses—of the 50 nations that have started vaccination campaigns, 40 are high-income, according to WHO assistant director-general Mariangela Simao.

But Simao said efforts were underway to ensure access for all.

"No one needs to panic, because you're going to get a vaccine," she said.

The WHO co-led Covax facility, a globally-pooled vaccine procurement and distribution effort, has struck agreements with five manufacturers for two billion vaccine doses.

The urgency to be vaccinated wasn't being felt everywhere, however.

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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