

Biden offers Covid-weary US hope for summer, but says 'fight' not over

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President Joe Biden on Thursday offered his COVID-weary nation a tantalizing glimpse of an almost normal July 4th, outlining in a speech how the United States can defeat the coronavirus if people stay united on

prevention measures and get vaccinated.

"This fight is far from over," Biden said in his first televised primetime address as president, marking 12 months since the coronavirus outbreak was declared a pandemic.

Delivering an emotional tribute to the more than 530,000 Americans who have died from COVID-19 over the last 12 months, Biden said "While it was different for everyone, we all lost something: a collective suffering, a collective sacrifice."

But he raised hope that the country hardest hit by the global pandemic could overcome the virus if Americans work together and follow health experts' guidelines on wearing masks and getting vaccinated.

"Just as we are emerging from a dark winter into a hopeful spring and summer is not the time to not stick with the rules," he said.

If Americans stay the course, they may be able to mark their cherished July 4th national holiday in somewhat normal circumstances, he said.

"If we do this together, by July the 4th, there's a good chance you, your families and friends will be able to get together in your backyard or in your neighborhood and have a cookout or a barbecue and celebrate Independence Day," he said.

"That will make this Independence Day something truly special where we not only mark our independence as a nation but we begin to mark our independence from this virus."

The United States leads the world in COVID-19 deaths, but it is now surging ahead of European countries and Canada with vaccine production and distribution.

Biden said his initial goal of one million vaccinations administered every day was already being easily surpassed and he planned for the authorities to be "maintaining, beating our current pace of two million shots a day."

To reinforce that huge effort, Biden said he was ordering every state in the country to remove priority group restrictions by May 1, thereby allowing any adult regardless of age or other conditions to be vaccinated.

The Democrat's bid to get the country back on its feet received a huge boost this week when Congress passed his \$1.9 trillion economic stimulus package dubbed the American Rescue Plan.

Biden says this will give poorer families a "fighting chance" and help fire up the engines of the world's biggest economy, something the IMF said Thursday could also help ignite global recovery.

The president said in his speech that the plan "meets the moment" and "if it fails at any point, I will acknowledge that it failed—but it will not."

"There is light and better days ahead," he said.

AstraZeneca woes

Earlier Thursday, vaccination efforts elsewhere took a hit when several countries suspended the use of AstraZeneca's jab over blood clot fears, prompting Europe's medical agency to quickly reassure the public there were no known health risks linked to it.

A year on, several countries are looking to ramp up vaccine rollouts as a way forward. But Denmark, Norway and Iceland all suspended use of the Oxford/AstraZeneca jab over the new concerns about side-effects.

Italy joined them, banning a batch of the vaccine as a precaution, even as

its medicines regulator said there was currently no established link with the alleged side-effects.

The European Medicines Agency (EMA) issued a statement seeking to assuage fears, and Britain called the jab "safe and effective."

EU approves new jab

European Union countries are eager to speed up vaccine drives after a slow start left the bloc behind the United States, Israel and Britain—leaders in the race to immunize.

On Thursday, the EMA approved the single-shot Johnson & Johnson vaccine, which is stored at warmer temperatures than its competitors and is easier to distribute.

"Authorities across the European Union will have another option to combat the pandemic," EMA chief Emer Cooke said in a statement.

Adding to the optimism, a real-world study in Israel showed the Pfizer/BioNTech jabs to be 97 percent effective against symptomatic COVID cases, higher than originally thought.

'War footing'

Since first emerging in China at the end of 2019, the [coronavirus](#) has infected more than 118 million people and killed more than 2.6 million people, with few parts of the globe left untouched.

The WHO officially declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11 last year as infection numbers were beginning to explode across Asia and Europe.

The only defenses to the contagious virus then appeared to be face masks and stopping people from interacting.

The pandemic has subjected billions to anti-COVID restrictions and left the global economy in tatters—an outcome unimaginable at the outset of the crisis.

"We are on a war footing," Corinne Krencker, the head of a hospital network in eastern France told AFP on March 11 last year, as patient and death numbers began to surge.

Today, more than 300 million vaccine doses have been administered in 140 countries, according to an AFP tally.

Now, governments have started to cautiously roll back measures put in place over what turned out to be a deadly winter in many spots.

Greece hopes to reopen for tourists in mid-May, a government official said Thursday. France said it would ease travel restrictions from seven countries including Britain.

And the sports world—after a year of cancelled or mainly spectator-less matches—also looked to a return to normal thanks to more jobs.

The International Olympic Committee said athletes at the Tokyo Games and the 2022 Beijing Winter Games would be offered vaccines bought from China.

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