



Deserted, boarded up, fenced off: Washington barely recognizable

## Turbulent Trump diplomacy ends with scrapped Europe, Taiwan trips

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WUHAN: A woman wearing a face mask holds a baby that wears a protective shield during rush hour on a street outside of a shopping mall complex in Wuhan yesterday. A team of WHO experts will land directly in Wuhan today, China's foreign ministry said. — AFP

## US COVID-19 deaths hit daily record

## China rushes to contain outbreaks; global infections soar past 91 million

WASHINGTON: The United States has endured its worst day of the pandemic, with three Americans dying every minute, as China took decisive steps yesterday to stamp out a tiny coronavirus outbreak. Global infections have soared past 91 million, and the spikes have forced governments around the world to reimpose restrictions such as unpopular and economically painful lockdowns, including in Europe which is battling a devastating second wave.

The United States is the worst-hit nation, logging a record 4,470 deaths in 24 hours on Tuesday, as it reeled from a winter surge in infections that has overwhelmed hospitals and clinics in many areas even as vaccines are rolled out. "It's most definitely the darkest period of my entire career," said Kari McGuire, a palliative care supervisor at the St Mary hospital in Apple Valley, a small rural town in California.

"I've personally had to watch people that I know, that I care for, watch their loved ones die. It's been very difficult." Coronavirus patients at the over-stretched hospital were crammed into hallways,

makeshift ICU beds and even the pediatric ward.

McGuire said there were "astronomical numbers" of COVID-19 deaths—the United States accounts for a fifth of the world's almost two million coronavirus fatalities. Authorities on Tuesday announced that starting January 26, all travelers entering the United States by air will need a negative Covid-19 test before departure.

Neighboring Canada also scrambled to contain a worrying outbreak, ordering residents in Ontario—its economic engine and most populous province—to stay home. Ontario Premier Doug Ford warned that the healthcare system was "on the brink of collapse."

## Fresh China lockdown

The daily US death toll on Tuesday was nearly as high as the official fatality count for the entire pandemic in China, where the coronavirus was first detected in late 2019. China largely eliminated its outbreak through a number of strict lockdowns and extensive testing and tracing, but recent weeks have seen a smattering of cases. That has forced more

than 20 million people under some form of lockdown in the country's northern regions. The government of northeastern Heilongjiang province—home to 37.5 million people—declared an "emergency state" yesterday after 28 cases were found, telling residents not to leave the province unless necessary.

China is rushing to inoculate millions using home-grown vaccines ahead of the Lunar New Year travel rush, which authorities fear could boost the risk of transmission. Japan was set to expand a coronavirus state of emergency yesterday beyond greater Tokyo to seven more regions to counter a surge in cases.

While Japan's outbreak remains comparatively small, with around 4,100 deaths overall, medics say hospitals are under heavy strain from the spikes in the worst-affected areas.

## Indonesia kicks off vaccinations

Governments worldwide are racing to acquire and deliver vaccines to help end the Covid-19 crisis, though the World Health Organization has warned that coverage is not expected to be wide enough for pop-

ulation-level immunity this year. One of the Chinese-developed vaccines, CoronaVac, demonstrated a 50 percent efficacy following tests in Brazil, the organization in charge of its production in the South American country said Tuesday. While that figure is much lower than the Moderna and Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines, Indonesia—one of the world's most populous nations—has given it the green light and kicked off a mass inoculation drive with it yesterday.

President Joko Widodo became Indonesia's first recipient of that shot on live television. While criticism and fears over slow vaccine rollouts are growing in North America and Europe, there was some positive news Tuesday when the European Union started the approval process for the Oxford-AstraZeneca shot. But the government of Ukraine was under pressure for failing to secure any Western-made vaccines, with health officials in Kiev so far rejecting the Russian Sputnik V shot.

President Volodymyr Zelensky appealed for EU help Tuesday, saying it was "extremely important to get the vaccines." — AFP

## How Ireland became 'most infectious' country

DUBLIN: In the midst of a third wave of coronavirus infections, Ireland now holds the unhappy title of the nation with the highest transmission rate in the world. The country of five million has suffered only 2,397 virus deaths to date and gained plaudits for the way it handled two previous pandemic waves.

In December, it had the lowest incidence rate in the European Union after becoming the first member country to launch a second lockdown. But now it sits atop a world table tracking fresh infections. There were 1,288 confirmed cases per million of the population on Monday according to data compiled by Oxford University—placing Ireland first, ahead of the Czech Republic and Slovenia.

## 'Tsunami of infection'

Ireland had officially registered just over 93,000 cases on January 1 but that figure jumped to more than 150,000 by Monday. On Tuesday, Switzerland announced a quarantine on Irish travellers as World Health Organization (WHO) emergency director Michael Ryan said the nation has "one of the most acute increases in disease incidence of any country". The head of Ireland's health service has warned that hospitals were "beyond strain". According to Tuesday's figures, there are 1,700 patients hospitalized with the virus, nearly double the peak registered in Ireland's first wave early last year.

The third lockdown has seen schools, non-essential retail and the hospitality sector totally shut.



DUBLIN: Pedestrians shop in advance of a new coronavirus lockdown in Dublin.—AFP

Prime Minister Micheal Martin said last week healthcare workers were facing a "tsunami of infection". "Unless you are involved in absolutely essential work you have no reason to be away from your home," he warned the public.

## Hectic Christmas

However, just weeks earlier, Ireland was one of the nations to dramatically relax coronavirus restrictions around the festive period. Pubs, restaurants, gyms, hairdressers and non-essential shops were permitted to reopen in December. The decision reportedly cut against the advice of Ireland's National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), which recommended more stringent measures remain in place.

Ireland further relaxed restrictions in late December—allowing up to three households to mingle as Martin aimed to give citizens a "meaningful Christmas". Ireland's chief medical officer Tony Holohan has said there was "a significant change in the patterns of socialization" as a result of the December alterations.

He said before the Christmas period there were "pre-pandemic levels of socialization", abetting the spread of the virus.

## UK variant

Ireland is also reporting a spike in cases of a new variant of coronavirus first identified in neighboring Britain. The new strain, which is believed to be up to 70 percent more transmissible, was first identified in the south of England.

Ireland announced the first confirmed case of the variant on Christmas Day. On Monday health officials said data from the first week of 2021 showed the new variant now accounts for 45 percent of samples tested. Ireland banned flights from Britain from December 20 until January 9 and now requires arriving travellers to present a negative test. However there has been some suggestion from media that Ireland's unique border arrangements hamper efforts to quash the spread of the new variant from Britain. Ireland borders the UK province of Northern Ireland, the site of a sectarian conflict known as "The Troubles" which ended in 1998. — AFP

## Biden names Power as US aid chief

WASHINGTON: President-elect Joe Biden yesterday nominated former ambassador Samantha Power, a forceful advocate of humanitarian diplomacy, to lead US foreign aid and elevated the position's role. Power, if confirmed as administrator of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), would sit on the National Security Council along with John Kerry, the former secretary of state tapped as climate envoy — for the first time giving such prominence to the two issues.

"Samantha Power is a world-renowned voice of conscience and moral clarity — challenging and rallying the international community to stand up for the dignity and humanity of all people," Biden said in a statement.

"As USAID administrator, Ambassador Power will be a powerful force for lifting up the vulnerable, ushering in a new era of human progress and development and advancing American interests globally." Power would be the best-known figure ever to lead USAID, a new indication that Biden plans to put a focus on overseas assistance, which Secretary of State-nominee Antony Blinken has said will be "at the center of our foreign policy."

A former war correspondent born in Ireland, Power won the Pulitzer Prize for her 2002 book "A Problem from Hell" in which she critiques the



Samantha Power

US reluctance to label and prevent genocide around the world.

Power, 50, was an early supporter of Barack Obama who in his second term as president made her US ambassador to the United Nations. In a memoir published in 2019 entitled "The Education of an Idealist," Power described the struggles to fit her vision into the reality of governance, including her unsuccessful push for more action on Syria by Obama, who feared stronger US intervention would become a quagmire.

At USAID, Power will face an early test in seeing how US assistance can bridge inequalities that have been aggravated by the Covid-19 crisis, which the World Bank has estimated could plunge up to 115 million people worldwide into extreme poverty. Outgoing president Donald Trump has been a staunch critic of foreign aid, saying the United States should focus on itself, although bipartisan coalitions in Congress have rejected his more drastic proposals of cuts. —AFP