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# Wuhan marks one year since lockdown as pandemic rages

Biden warns of 600,000 dead • WHO: Fabric masks work against virus variants



WUHAN, China: A woman wearing a facemask dances in Wuhan, one year after the city went into lockdown to curb the spread of COVID-19. — AFP

**WUHAN, China:** The Chinese city of Wuhan marked one year since the start of its traumatic 76-day coronavirus lockdown yesterday, while the pandemic raged elsewhere and governments scrambled to put in place new measures. Europe faced a worsening struggle with production woes hitting supply of the AstraZeneca/Oxford vaccine as well as the Pfizer/BioNTech shot.

Around the world, more than 2.1 million people have died of COVID-19 since it emerged in China in December 2019, with over 98 million infected. In the world's worst-hit country, US President Joe Biden warned America's death toll could pass 600,000, the highest estimate yet that would mark a devastating rise on the 400,000 fatalities so far.

But the picture was vastly different in Wuhan, where humming traffic, bustling sidewalks, and citizens packing parks and public transport underscored the scale of the recovery in the metropolis of 11 million where the pathogen first emerged before going global. Elsewhere in China, new outbreaks have prompted harsh responses. Thousands of Hong Kongers in Jordan, one of the city's poorest and most densely-packed districts, were ordered to stay home yesterday unless they can show a negative

test, in the city's first lockdown.

AstraZeneca told AFP late Friday that "lower yield" at one of its vaccine-making sites would affect deliveries across Europe. Lithuania estimated it would receive 80 percent fewer AstraZeneca doses than hoped in the first quarter, although German and French ministers tried to reassure the public of a steady supply. Deliveries of Pfizer-made shots to the continent's countries are already behind schedule as the US firm upgrades capacity at a Belgian plant.

On Friday, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said there was "some evidence" the new strain first detected in the country "may be associated with a higher degree of mortality" as well as being more infectious. At 95,981 as of Friday, the UK death toll is the highest in Europe.

Norwegian capital Oslo toughened health restrictions after the British variant was found in a retirement home, closing all but essential shops and asking people to restrict movements. A French government source told AFP a new lockdown in the country looked increasingly likely with the more transmissible strain.

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## Saudi intercepts 'hostile target' over capital

**RIYADH:** Saudi Arabia intercepted a "hostile target" over Riyadh yesterday, said state media in the kingdom which has come under repeated attack from Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels since 2015. It was unclear who was behind the incident, with the kingdom's brief statement stopping short of accusing anyone and the Houthis saying they were not involved.

An explosion was heard in the Saudi capital at around 11:00 am (0800 GMT), AFP correspondents reported. "I heard a loud sound and thought that something had fallen from the sky," said one resident, who lives in the Al-Sulaimaniyah district of Riyadh. "The whole house was shaking."

The Saudi-led coalition, which backs Yemen's internationally recognized government against the Houthis, said it had "intercepted and destroyed a hostile air target going towards Riyadh", without elaborating, according to state-run Al Ekhbariya television station. Riyadh's King Khaled International Airport said there were a number of flight delays, but it was not immediately clear if they were linked to yesterday's incident.

Rebel spokesman Yahya Sarie said the Houthis were not behind the incident and "have not conducted any offensive operations against the aggressor countries in the past 24 hours". In a statement carried by rebel media, Sarie added that "any operation is announced with full pride and honor".

Saudi Arabia has been repeatedly targeted by the Houthis since its 2015 intervention in Yemen, where it leads a military coalition that includes the United Arab Emirates that backs the government. It is rare, however, for drones and missiles launched by the Houthis to reach the kingdom's capital - about 700 km from the Yemeni border.

The incident comes only days after Joe Biden was sworn-in as US president, replacing Donald Trump. According to Biden's pick for secretary of state, Antony Blinken, the new US administration will quickly revisit the designation of Yemen's Houthi rebels as terrorists. At his confirmation hearing on Tuesday, Blinken said he would "immediately" review the Trump administration's labeling of the insurgents, fearing the move was worsening a humanitarian crisis. — AFP

## Iconic US talk show host Larry King dies at 87

**LOS ANGELES:** The iconic talk show host Larry King, one of the most recognizable figures on US television as he interviewed everyone who was anyone over a career spanning 60 years, died yesterday at the age of 87. The company he co-founded, Ora Media, did not state a cause of death but media reports said King had been battling COVID-19 for weeks and had suffered several health problems in recent years.

King, with his trademark suspenders, black rim glasses and deep voice, was best known for a 25-year run as a talk show host on CNN's "Larry King Live". "For 63 years and across the platforms of radio, television and digital media, Larry's many thousands of interviews, awards, and global acclaim stand as a testament to his unique and lasting talent

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Larry King

## Imams mobilize to counter UK vaccine disinfo

**LONDON:** Imams across Britain are helping a drive to dispel coronavirus disinformation, using Friday sermons and their influential standing within Muslim communities to argue that COVID-19 vaccines are safe. Qari Asim, chairman of the Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board (MINAB) which is leading a campaign to reassure its faithful, is among those publically advocating that the inoculations are compatible with Islamic practices.

"We are confident that the two vaccines that have been used in the UK, Oxford AstraZeneca and Pfizer, are permissible from an Islamic perspective," he told AFP. "The hesitancy, the anxiety (and) concern is driven by misinformation, conspiracy theories, fake news and rumors."

Britain, the hardest-hit country in Europe by the virus after registering nearly 95,000 deaths, is relying on its biggest-ever vaccination effort to end repeated cycles of lockdowns and restrictions. However, a report from the scientific committee advising the government showed stronger mistrust of vaccines among ethnic minorities than the rest of the UK population.

It highlighted that 72 percent of black survey respondents were

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BIRMINGHAM: A man grimaces as he receives the Oxford/AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine at the Al-Abbas Islamic Centre on Jan 21, 2021. — AFP

## COVID forces Jordan kids to start working

**AMMAN:** Omar's heart sinks when he trudges past his closed school gates in the Jordanian capital Amman - now part of his trip to work, to repair and clean kerosene heaters. The 14-year-old, who dreams of becoming a pilot, is one of many minors experts say have been forced prematurely into the labor market. Schools throughout Jordan have been closed for nearly a year now, and the economic fallout from the novel coronavirus pandemic

has eaten into breadwinners' ability to feed their families.

"As school is shut, I help my family financially," said Omar, sporting a sweater and dirty jeans as he cleaned a heater with his blackened hands. He works exhausting 12-hour days at the workshop, and collapses into bed after a shower and a quick evening meal. Overall, the work "doesn't bother me", he said. "What is unbearable is the smell of kerosene... (it) doesn't go away."

He earns three dinars (around \$4.25) a day, which helps pay the family's monthly rent of 130 dinars. His contribution is vital because his father, a day laborer, has struggled to find work due to the coronavirus downturn. But Omar has not given up hope, and said he was

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AMMAN: Jordanian youths using handcarts work in the capital's Wahdat district on Jan 10, 2021. — AFP