

COVID19: In Hopes to Return to Normal



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NUMBERS SPEAK VOLUME

COVID19 VACCINATION RATE PER 4 COUNTRY



UNITED KINGDOM

71% FULLY
VACCINATED
5.7% PARTLY
VACCINATED

UNITED STATES

64% FULLY
VACCINATED
12% PARTLY
VACCINATED

CHINA

85% FULLY
VACCINATED
3% PARTLY
VACCINATED

JAPAN

79% FULLY
VACCINATED
1% PARTLY
VACCINATED



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‘Take back life’: More nations ease coronavirus restrictions

By JAMEY KEATEN Associated Press

Late-night partying at clubs. Elbow-to-elbow seating in movie theaters. Going without masks in public, especially in Europe and North America: Step by step, many countries are easing their COVID-19 restrictions amid hopes the omicron wave may have passed its peak. The early moves to relax precautions, based on declining or flattening case counts in recent days, represent what could be another turning point in a nearly two-year pandemic that has been full of them.

The extraordinarily contagious omicron has fueled more cases worldwide over the past 10 weeks — 90 million — than were seen during all of 2020, the outbreak’s first full year.

But the World Health Organization this week said some countries can now consider carefully relaxing the rules if they have high immunity rates, their health care systems are strong and the epidemiological trends are going in the right direction.

New cases worldwide for the week of Jan. 24-30 were similar to the level of the previous week, though the number of new deaths increased 9% to more than 59,000, reflecting the usual lag between infection and death, according to the U.N. health agency.

The most pronounced pullbacks in restrictions are in Europe, for many months the world’s epicenter of the pandemic, as well as in South Africa — where omicron was first announced publicly — and the United States. In Britain and the U.S., as in South Africa before them, COVID-19 cases skyrocketed at first but are now coming down rapidly.

In the U.S., local leaders have served up a hodgepodge of responses. The city of Denver is ending requirements for proof



of vaccination and mask rules for businesses and public spaces, while keeping them for schools and public transportation.

New York’s governor plans in the next week to review whether to keep the state’s mask mandate at a time when cases and hospitalizations have plummeted in the early omicron hotspot. New York City is averaging 4,200 cases a day, compared with 41,000 during the first week of January.

The U.S. as a whole is on a similar trajectory, with infections plunging from an average of over 800,000 a day 2 1/2 weeks ago to 430,000 this week.

England, France, Ireland, the Netherlands and several Nordic countries have taken steps to end or loosen their restrictions. In some places, like Norway and Denmark, the easing comes even though case counts are still hovering near their highs. Some governments are essentially betting that the pandemic is ebbing.

“Rest assured that the worst days are



Torvehallerne in Copenhagen, Denmark, Tuesday, Feb. 1, 2022.

(Liselotte Sabroe/Ritzau Scanpix via AP)



behind us,” said Health Minister Fahrettin Koca of Turkey, where the number of daily infections topped 100,000 on Tuesday, the highest on record in the country of over 80 million.

Last week, England ended almost all domestic restrictions. Masks aren’t required in public, vaccine passes are no longer needed to get into public venues, and the work-from-home order has been lifted. One lingering condition: Those who test positive still have to isolate.

On Tuesday, Norway lifted its ban on serving alcohol after 11 p.m. and the cap on private gatherings of no more than 10

people. People can sit elbow-to-elbow again at events with fixed seating, and sports events can take place as they did before the pandemic.

“Now it’s time for us to take back our everyday life,” Norwegian Health Minister Ingvild Kjerkol said Tuesday. “Tonight, we scrap most measures so we can be closer to living a normal life.”

In the capital of Denmark, which on Tuesday took the lead among European Union members by scrapping most restrictions, many people were still wearing masks on the streets and in stores a day later.

“I still wear a mask because I want to protect myself and others whose health is not so good, or who have health issues,” said retiree Kjeld Rasmussen, 86, in Copenhagen. “I have several things (health conditions) and so for me, it is also a good way to say to others, ‘Keep your distance.’”

More than 370 million cases and over 5.6 million deaths linked to COVID-19 have been reported worldwide.

The loosening of omicron’s grip in many places has given rise to hope that the outbreak is about to enter a new phase in which the virus will become, like the



flu, a persistent but generally manageable threat that people can live with.

Switzerland on Wednesday scrapped work-at-home and quarantine requirements and announced plans for an easing of other restrictions in coming weeks, saying: "Despite record high infection figures, hospitals have not been overburdened and the occupancy of intensive care units has fallen further."

"There are increasing signs that the acute crisis will soon be over and the endemic phase could begin," the government said. While omicron has proved less likely to cause severe illness than the delta vari-

ant, experts are warning people against underestimating it or letting their guard down against the possibility of new, more dangerous mutant varieties.

"We are concerned that a narrative has taken hold in some countries that because of vaccines — and because of omicron's high transmissibility and lower severity — preventing transmission is no longer possible and no longer necessary," WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said Tuesday. "Nothing could be further from the truth."

WHO's emergencies chief, Dr. Michael Ryan, warned that political pressure could

lead some countries to open back up too soon — and "that will result in unnecessary transmission, unnecessary severe disease and unnecessary death."

As throughout the pandemic, many countries are going their own way: Italy has tightened its health pass requirements during the omicron surge. As of Monday, it began requiring at least a negative test within the previous 48 hours to enter banks and post offices, and anyone over 50 who hasn't been vaccinated risks a 100-euro (\$113) fine.

Austria, which was the first European country to impose a vaccine mandate, is



planning to loosen COVID-19 restrictions this month and take such steps as letting restaurants stay open later. Greece has ordered fines for people 60 and over who refuse to get vaccinated.

In Germany, where infections are still setting daily records, curbs on private gatherings and requirements for people to show proof of vaccination or recovery to enter nonessential stores remain in place. "I think that the moment we have the feeling that we can loosen responsibly, federal and state governments will take that step," German government spokesman Steffen Hebestreit said Monday. "But at the moment, it is still a bit premature."

Other continents are being even more cautious. Some of the world's highest vaccination rates are Asia, and its leaders are holding to stricter lockdown measures or even tightening them for now. The remote Pacific island country of

Tonga headed into lockdown Wednesday after discovering infections in two port workers helping to distribute aid in the wake of a volcanic eruption and tsunami. The country up to now has been virus-free.

Just days ahead of the Beijing Winter Olympics, China is sticking to its zero-COVID policy. It imposes strict lockdowns and quarantines quickly when any cases are detected, mandates masks on public transportation, and requires people to show "green" status on a health app to enter most restaurants and stores.

South Africa this week announced that it has exited the fourth wave, saying scientific studies show immunity has hit 60% to 80%. Masks are still mandatory, but a curfew has been lifted and schools are required to fully — not just partially — open for the first time since March 2020.

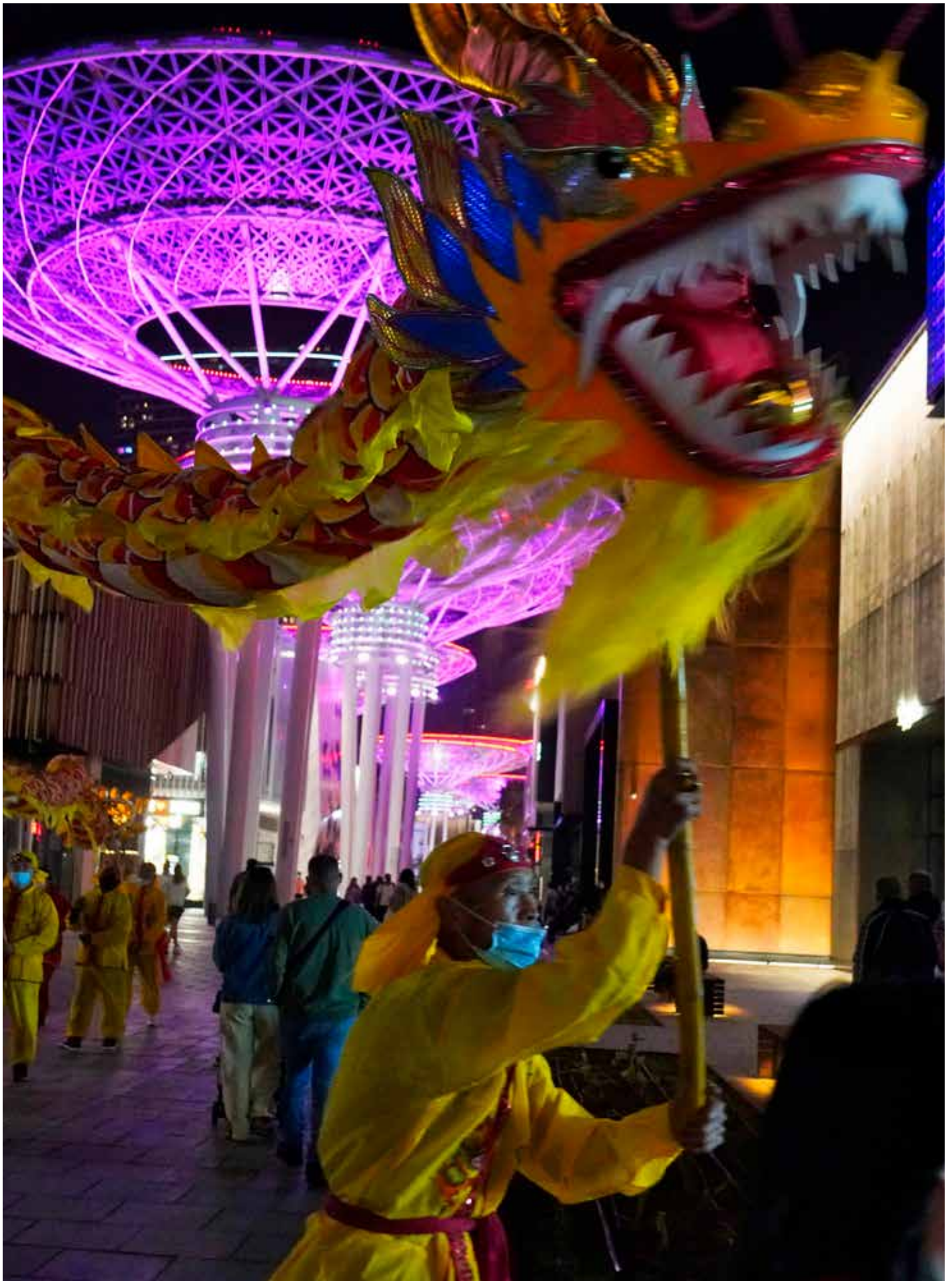
Dr. Atiya Mosam of the Public Health Association of South Africa said such

steps are a "practical move towards acknowledging that COVID-19 is here to stay, even though we might have a milder strain."

"We are acknowledging how transmission occurs, while basically balancing people's need to live their lives," Mosam said.

Mogomotsi Magome in Johannesburg; David Rising in Bangkok; Geir Moulson in Berlin; Graham Dunbar in Beijing; Suzan Frazer in Ankara, Turkey; and Jan M. Olsen in Copenhagen, Denmark, contributed to this report.

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President Joe Biden speaks during a news conference in the East Room of the White House in Washington, Wednesday, Jan. 19, 2022. (AP Photo/Susan Walsh)

Biden says nation weary from COVID but rising with him in WH

Biden says nation weary from COVID but rising with him in WH

By ZEKE MILLER and JOSH BOAK
Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden acknowledged Wednesday that the pandemic has left Americans exhausted and demoralized but insisted at a news conference marking his first year in office that he has “outperformed” expectations in dealing with it.

Facing sagging poll numbers and a stalled legislative agenda, Biden conceded he would likely have to pare back his “build back better” recovery package and instead settle for “big chunks” of his signature economic plan. He promised to further attack inflation and the pandemic and blamed Republicans for uniting in opposition to his proposals rather than offering ideas of their own.

This is a perilous time for Biden: The nation is gripped by a disruptive new surge of virus cases, and inflation is at a level not seen in a generation. Democrats are bracing for a potential midterm rout if he can’t turn things around.

Biden insisted that voters will come to embrace a more positive view of his tenure — and of his beleaguered party — in time. His appeal to voters for patience came with a pledge to spend more time outside Washington to make the case to them directly.

Biden also addressed the brewing crisis on the Ukraine border, where Russia has massed some 100,000 troops and raised concerns that Moscow is ready to launch a further invasion.

The president said his “guess” is Russia may move further but he believes President Vladimir Putin doesn’t want full-blown war. He declared Russia would pay a “dear price” if Putin launches a military incursion.

“He has to do something,” Biden said of Putin. “He is trying to find his place in the world between China and the West.”

Biden suggested a “minor incursion” might elicit a lesser response than a full-scale invasion of the country, a comment that drew immediate condemnation from some corners.

“President Biden basically gave Putin a green light to invade Ukraine by yammering about the supposed insignificance of a ‘minor incursion,’” said Republican Sen. Ben Sasse.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki indicated in a subsequent statement that that wasn’t necessarily about tanks and troops.

“President Biden also knows from long experience that the Russians have an extensive playbook of aggression short of military action, including cyberattacks and paramilitary tactics. And he affirmed today that those acts of Russian aggression will be met with a decisive, reciprocal, and united response,” she said.

Biden held forth for 1 hour and 50 minutes in the East Room of the White House, appearing to relish the opportunity to parry questions from two dozen journalists with doses of wit and a few flashes of anger. At several points, he looked at his watch, smiled and kept calling on reporters.

He fielded questions about inflation, nuclear talks with Iran, voting rights, political division, Vice President Kamala Harris’ place on the 2024 ticket, trade with China and the competency of government. Those questions showed the multitude of challenges confronting the president, each of them as much a risk as an opportunity to prove himself.

The president began by reeling off early progress in fighting the virus and showcasing quick passage of an ambitious bipartisan roads-and-bridges infrastructure deal. But his economic, voting rights, police reform and immigration agenda have all been thwarted in a barely Democratic-controlled Senate, while inflation has emerged as an economic threat to the nation and a political risk for Biden.

Despite his faltering approval numbers, Biden claimed to have “probably outperformed what anybody thought would happen” in a country still coping with the coronavirus.

“After almost two years of physical, emotional and psychological impact of this pandemic, for many of us, it’s been too much to bear,” Biden said.

“Some people may call what’s happening now ‘the new normal,’” he added, his voice rising. “I call it a job not yet finished. It will get better.”

On his nearly \$2 trillion economic agenda that West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin has blocked from moving forward, Biden said he’ll pass the parts of the package that can net sufficient votes. This likely means not extending the expanded child tax credit or providing financial support to community colleges, Biden said.

“I think we can break the package up, get as much as we can now, come back and fight for the rest,” he said, later adding that he would apply the same strategy to his voting reform agenda.

The social spending bill was once viewed as a catch-all home for various progressive priorities, but now Democrats are sensing a need to deliver a solid accomplishment to voters in the midterm year and are beginning to come to terms with a slimmed-down package that can overcome Manchin’s reticence.

The White House and congressional Democratic leaders are expected to refocus their attention on it beginning next week, after the all-but-certain collapse of the Democrats’ push on voting rights legislation. Talks to craft a new bill that meets Manchin’s demands and can garner the virtually unanimous Democratic support needed to pass Congress will likely take weeks.

The Democrats’ goal is to have a package “or be on the cusp of one” that Biden can highlight in his March 1 State of the Union address.

If Biden seemed to have one set of regrets so far, it was his inability because of the coronavirus to connect with more Americans outside the capital. He noted that this challenge was most acutely felt by Black voters who wanted him to push more aggressively on expanding access to voting.

“I don’t get a chance to look people in the eye because of both COVID and things that are happening in Washington,” he said.

Speaking as Democrats were mounting a doomed effort to change Senate rules to pass the voting measure, Biden said he still hoped that it would pass in some form and wasn’t prepared yet to discuss possible executive actions on the issue. The vote spotlighted the constraints on Biden’s influence barely a week after he delivered an impassioned speech in Atlanta suggesting opponents of the measures were taking a historical stance alongside segregationists and exhorting senators to action.

Still, he said he understood that civil

rights groups were anxious and frustrated about the lack of action, particularly Black voters who question why he didn’t press the issue harder and earlier.

There are at least 19 Republican-backed laws in states that make it harder to vote, and Jan. 6 insurrection supporters are filling local election posts and running for office.

It was Biden’s seventh solo news conference as president. The ongoing threat from the coronavirus was evident in the setup of Wednesday’s gathering: A limited number of reporters were allowed to attend and all had to have been tested for the virus and wear masks.

The president used the event to pay heed to growing anxiety about rising prices. Staring down an inflation rate that has gone from 1.7% at his inauguration to 7%, he called on the Federal Reserve to lessen its monetary boosting of the economy by raising interest rates, which would in theory help to reduce inflation.

“Given the strength of our economy, and the pace of recent price increases, it’s important to recalibrate the support that is now necessary,” Biden said. “Now, we need to get inflation under control.”

Despite it all, Biden said he’s convinced the country is still with him “even if they don’t tell that to pollsters.

“I don’t believe the polls,” he said.

President Joe Biden speaks during a news conference in the East Room of the White House in Washington, Wednesday, Jan. 19, 2022. (AP Photo/Susan Walsh)

