

The Taliban appealed on Friday for emergency humanitarian aid without "political bias", saying recent snow and flooding had worsened the plight of the Afghan people, AFP reported.

WHO: Calling Omicron 'mild' a mistake as variant spreading worldwide



HENRY NICHOLLS/REUTERS
People walk through Piccadilly Circus amid the coronavirus disease outbreak in central London, Britain, on January 6, 2022.

The Omicron variant of COVID-19 is killing people across the globe and should not be dismissed as mild, the World Health Organization insisted.

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said on Thursday the record numbers of people catching the new variant – which is rapidly out-competing the previously-dominant Delta variant in many

countries – meant hospitals were being overwhelmed, AFP reported.

"While Omicron does appear to be less severe compared to Delta, especially in those vaccinated, it does not mean it should be categorised as mild," Tedros told a press conference.

"Just like previous variants, Omicron is hospitalising people and it is killing people," he explained.

"In fact, the tsunami of cases is so huge and quick, that it is overwhelming health systems around the world."

Just under 9.5 million new COVID-19 cases were reported to the WHO last week – a record, up 71 percent on the week before.

But even this was an underestimate, Tedros said, as it did not reflect the backlog of testing around the Christmas-New

Year holidays, positive self-tests not registered, and overburdened surveillance systems missing cases.

The new variant is quickly spreading across the world.

Hospitals across the United States are postponing elective surgeries to free up staff and beds due to a surge in COVID-19 cases driven by the highly transmissible Omicron variant, according to Reuters.

Administrators say hospital staff shortages have been compounded in the last month by medical practitioners isolating or quarantining as they themselves are infected or exposed to the virus.

The seven-day average of COVID-19 patients admitted to hospitals was up 60% from last week to 16,458 per day, CDC data shows, just 0.2% shy from the national peak in hospital admissions exactly a year ago.

Data from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services shows that over 82% of ICU beds nationwide are currently in use as of Thursday with over 27% in use for COVID-19 cases.

In Britain, Ministry of Defence on Friday said that it had begun the deployment of the military to support hospitals experiencing staff shortages and extreme pressures due to record COVID-19 cases in the country.

Britain has seen a surge in coronavirus cases due to the Omicron variant, and has reported over 150,000 new cases each day over the last week.

Germany's leaders to consider possible new restrictions and changes to quarantine rules as the new variant advances quickly.

On Friday, the national disease control center, the Robert Koch Institute, reported an official rate of 303.4 new cases per 100,000 residents over the past seven days. The European country reported 56,335 new cases on Friday.

France's Parliament on Thursday approved President Emmanuel Macron's plans for a vaccine pass to help curb the spread of the Omicron variant.

Survivors: Over 100 killed in attack in Nigeria's north

More than 100 people were killed in Nigeria's troubled northern region, survivors told The Associated Press, as authorities continue to search for bodies and for suspects of the three-day violence.

Bandits arrived in large numbers in the Anka and Bukkuyum local government areas of Zamfara state on Tuesday evening, shooting and burning down houses until Thursday, according to Abubakar Ahmed, a resident in Bukkuyum.

"They killed more than 100 people," Ahmed said, adding that as many as nine communities were affected in the incident.

Resident Aliyu Anka, in Anka, also confirmed that the casualty figure was more than 100. In one village, "they killed people from 20 years (of age) and above," he said. "Some have been buried, some were burnt and we are still looking for bodies."

No group has claimed responsibility for the attack but blame quickly fell on the armed groups who have carried out thousands of abductions and killings in the northwest and central states of the West African nation.

Ibrahim Dosara, Zamfara commissioner for information, told AP they were awaiting more information about the incident including the number of casualties. As of now, a military aircraft has been deployed along with security forces as a manhunt for the attackers continues, he said.

Africa's most populous country has been struggling to contain pockets of insecurity by such violent attacks, especially in the troubled northern region but the latest incident is one of the deadliest in recent years.

It comes just as authorities in Nigeria claimed they were recording successes in the fight against the armed groups. The widespread banditry in Nigeria's northwest is in addition to the insurgency in the northeast that has lasted more than a decade.

Some of the bandits – whom Nigerian authorities have designated as terrorists – are now joining forces with the extremist rebels, security analysts and residents say.

The groups mostly consist of young men from the Fulani ethnic group, who had traditionally worked as nomadic cattle herders and are caught up in a decades-long conflict with Hausa farming communities over access to water and grazing land.

The problem remains that the Nigerian security personnel are outnumbered and outgunned by the assailants, according to Oluwale Ojewale of the Africa-focused Institute of Security Studies.

Biden warns of peril from Trump's 'dagger' at democracy

U.S. President Joe Biden forcefully blamed Donald Trump and his supporters Thursday for holding a "dagger at the throat of democracy" with election lies that sparked last year's deadly assault on the U.S. Capitol, using the anniversary of the attack to warn that America's system of government remains under urgent threat.

Jan. 6 with their own eyes: The mob attacking police and breaking windows, a Confederate flag inside the Capitol, gallows erected outside amid calls to hang the vice president — all while Trump sat at the White House watching on TV.

"The former president's supporters are trying to rewrite history," Biden said, incredulous. "They want



AP
President Joe Biden speaks from Statuary Hall at the U.S. Capitol to mark the first anniversary of the Jan. 6 riot at the U.S. Capitol by supporters loyal to former president Donald Trump in Washington on Jan. 6, 2022.

The president set the tone on a day of remembrance that brought fiery speeches, moments of silence and anguished accounts from lawmakers recalling the terrifying hours of Jan. 6, 2021, when the Trump mob laid siege to the Capitol and rioters tried to stop the routine, ceremonial certification of election results, AP reported.

Notably, almost no Republicans joined Biden and the Democrats in what some hoped would be a day of reconciliation. Instead, it was a fresh and jarring display of a nation still deeply torn by the lies that led to the riot, by its unsettled aftermath and Trump's persisting grip on a large swath of the country.

"For the first time in our history, a president not just lost an election, he tried to prevent the peaceful transfer of power as a violent mob breached the Capitol," Biden said. "You can't love your country only when you win".

Biden's criticism of the defeated president was rife with condemnation for the assault that has fundamentally changed Congress and the nation, and has raised global concerns about the future of American democracy.

His voice booming at times, reverberating in the ornate Statuary Hall where rioters had laid siege, the president called on Americans to remember what they

you see Election Day as the day of insurrection and the riot that took place here on January 6 as a true expression of the will of the people. Can you think of a more twisted way to look at this country, to look at America? I cannot."

Until the anniversary, Biden had mentioned the attack only sparingly but he aggressively weighed in Thursday and coupled his message with a call for voting rights legislation that Democrats have long been urging.

The president's remarks drew a stark contrast with the false narratives that persist about the Capitol assault, including the continued refusal by many Republicans to affirm that Biden won the 2020 election. Five people died in the Capitol siege and its immediate aftermath.

"We must be absolutely clear about what is true and what is a lie," Biden said. "The former president of the United States of America has spread a web of lies about the 2020 election."

Yet even as the president spoke, the vanquished Trump gave no signs of letting go, a show of the division in the country emphasized by the silence and absence of most Republicans to join Biden at the Capitol.

EU angry over exclusion from Ukraine talks

Direct talks between the US and Russian diplomats on Ukraine infuriated the European Union as it has not invited to the negotiations.

EU Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen said Friday that negotiations to resolve tensions between Russia and Ukraine must involve Europe.



EPA/EFE
French President Emmanuel Macron (R) and European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen attend a media conference after a meeting at the Elysee Palace in Paris, France, on January 7, 2022.

Speaking ahead of crunch security talks between the United States and Russia next week, von der Leyen told a press conference in Paris: "One thing is clear: no solution without Europe. Whatever the solution, Europe has to be involved", AFP reported.

She added that the European Union was "very present" in Ukraine, with financial aid totalling six billion euros (\$6.7 billion), as well as highly dependent on its position as a transit hub for gas imports from Russia.

Talks between US and Russian diplomats will begin in Geneva on Monday after weeks of tensions over Russian troop deployments near its border with neighbouring Ukraine, with envoys on each side trying to avert a crisis.

French President Emmanuel Macron, speaking alongside von der Leyen, stressed that US-Russia talks were a positive development, but said they would not affect "European security architecture" which was "up to us to build."

"It's a good thing that there are discussions between the United States and Russia," he said.

"The coordination between the Europeans and Americans is exemplary on the matter," he added, while also calling for the European Union to hold its own talks with Moscow.

"Dialogue does not mean making concessions," he said.

Earlier on Friday, France's foreign minister said that Russia was trying to bypass the European Union by holding talks directly with the US, according to Reuters.

"(Russian President) Vladimir Putin wants to bypass the European Union... he wants to put dents in the EU cohesion, which is solidifying", Jean-Yves Le Drian told BFM TV and RMC Radio.

"You can't envisage EU security without the Europeans." France has just taken over the six-month rotating presidency of the EU.

Russia has moved nearly 100,000 troops close to its border with Ukraine. It says it is not preparing for an invasion but has listed its demands to ease tensions with West.

Among the demands are ruling out further NATO expansion and Ukraine's accession to the alliance and abandoning any NATO military activities in Ukraine, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Anger as Cambodia's PM meets Myanmar military leader

Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen's visit to Myanmar seeking to revive peace efforts after last year's military takeover provoked an angry backlash among critics, who say he is legitimizing the army's seizure of power.

Hun Sen is the first head of government which has visited Myanmar since the military takeover last February. The authoritarian Cambodian leader has held power for 36 years and keeps a tight leash on political activity at home, according to AP.

In his role as the current chairperson of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, he met with Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, who ousted the government of Aung San Suu Kyi, plunging Myanmar into violent conflict and economic disaster.

Photos posted by a military-related publication, the Popular News Journal, showed the two standing side by side in face masks, bumping forearms and seated on ornate gilt chairs before an elaborate golden screen.

The Myanmar Information Ministry said the two held talks on bilateral ties and issues of mutual concern, including ASEAN. It did not elaborate.

Protests and rallies were held in some parts of Myanmar as people expressed anger over Hun Sen's visit.

Hundreds of protesters burned portraits of the Cambodian prime minister and chanted, "Torch inhumane Hun Sen. People who engage with Min Aung Hlaing should die horrible deaths," videos of the protest posted online showed.

Last April, ASEAN leaders, including Min Aung Hlaing, agreed on a five-point roadmap toward a peaceful settlement of the Myanmar crisis, including an end to violence and a political dialogue between all stakeholders.

The Myanmar military has a history of bloodshed, including a brutal campaign against the Rohingya Muslim minority. Its seizure of power provoked nationwide nonviolent demonstrations, which security forces have quashed with deadly force.

The military has recently engaged in violent suppression of all dissent, disappearances, torture and extra-judicial killings. It has also launched air strikes and ground offensives against ethnic armed rebel groups.

Security forces have killed about 1,443 civilians, according to a detailed tally by the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners. As the crackdown has become more severe, an armed resistance has grown inside the country.