

Independence Day

Biden: U.S. 'coming back,' but COVID not finished

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WASHINGTON — After nearly six months in office, grappling with a pandemic every step of that way, President Joe Biden was determined to party.

"Today, all across this nation, we can say with confidence: America is coming back together," Biden declared Sunday as he hosted more than 1,000 guests for a July Fourth celebration on the South Lawn of the White House.

Biden wanted all Americans to celebrate, too, after enduring 16 months of disruption in the pandemic and more than 605,000 deaths. The White House encouraged gatherings and fireworks displays all around the country to mark — as though ripped from a Hollywood script — the nation's "independence" from the virus.

And there is much to cheer: Cases and deaths from COVID-19 are at or near record lows since the outbreak began, thanks to the robust U.S. vaccination program. Businesses and restaurants are open, hiring is picking up and travel is getting closer to pre-pandemic levels.

Still, it's hardly a "Mission Accomplished" moment. More than 200 Americans still die each day from COVID-19, a more infectious variant of the virus is spreading rapidly at home and abroad, and tens of millions of Americans have chosen not to get the lifesaving vaccines.

"If you've had the vaccine, you're doing great," said Dr. Mati Hlatshwayo Davis, an infectious disease physician at the John Cochran VA Medical Center and St. Louis Board of Health. "If you haven't had the vaccine, you should be alarmed and that's just the bottom line, there's no easy way to cut it."

"But that doesn't take away from the fact that this country is in a significantly better place," she said.

'Closer than ever' — but a goal is missed

For Biden it was a long-awaited opportunity to highlight the success of the vaccination campaign he championed. Sunday's South Lawn event was the largest yet of his presidency, the clearest indication yet that the U.S. has moved into a new phase of virus response. Shifting from a national emergency to a localized crisis of individual responsibility, the nation also moved from vaccinating Americans to promoting global health.

"This year the Fourth of July is a day of special celebration, for we're emerging from the darkness of a year of pandemic and isolation, a year of pain fear and heartbreaking loss," the president said before fireworks lit up the sky over the National Mall.

Noting the lockdowns that shuttered businesses, put millions out of work and separated untold numbers of families, Biden said, "Today we're closer than ever to declaring our independence from a deadly virus. That's not to say the battle against COVID-19 is over. We've got a lot more work to do."

Indeed, the president has come up short of the vaccination goal he had set for the Fourth with great fanfare. Biden had hoped to have 70% of the adult population vaccinated by Sunday, but clocked in at about 67%, according to figures from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Officials insisted that the miss would have little practical effect on Americans' ability to mark the Independence Day holiday.

What concerns them more is the emergence of two disparate realities



"Today, all across this nation, we can say with confidence: America is coming back together."

— President Joe Biden, before a crowd of 1,000 guests at a July Fourth celebration on the South Lawn of the White House on Sunday



President Joe Biden poses for a photo with (from left) granddaughter Finnegan Biden, first lady Jill Biden, granddaughter Naomi Biden and daughter Ashley Biden as they view fireworks on the South Lawn of the White House on Sunday.



People gather on a section of Pennsylvania Avenue that was reopened to the public on Sunday.



The crowd at the Nathan's Famous Hot Dog Eating Contest, a July Fourth tradition, in Coney Island, New York.

in the U.S.: the gap between heavily vaccinated communities where the virus is dying out and lesser-vaccinated ones where the new delta variant is already taking hold.

About 1,000 counties have a vaccination rate below 30%, and the federal government is warning that they could become the next hot spots as virus restrictions ease.

"The best defense against these variants is to get vaccinated," Biden said at the White House, calling vaccination "the most patriotic thing you can do."

To that end the administration is sending "surge" teams to Colorado and Missouri. Additional squads of infectious disease experts, public health professionals and doctors and nurses are

getting ready to assist in additional locations with a combination of low vaccination rates and rising cases.

Overall, the vastly improved American landscape stands in stark contrast with much of the rest of the world, where there remain vast vaccine deserts and wide community spread that could open the door to even more dangerous variants. The Biden administration is increasingly turning the federal response to the complicated logistics of sending excess U.S. vaccines abroad in an effort to assist other nations in beating back the pandemic.

When asked about the potential risks of holding gatherings around July Fourth in areas where there are large pockets of unvaccinated individ-

U.S. ready to deploy booster shots if needed, White House says

The U.S. government is ready to deploy booster shots if scientists and health officials determine they're needed in the fight against COVID-19, White House pandemic response coordinator Jeff Zients said.

After a historic vaccination drive, the U.S. fell short of Biden's goal of getting at least one dose to 70% of adults by Independence Day. The nationwide number was 67% on Saturday, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

While about a third of American adults haven't gotten even a first dose, Zients said the administration is ready for a booster-shot campaign if scientists and doctors conclude it's necessary. "We are prepared," he said on CNN's "State of the Union." "We will have the supply and the distribution, if it's determined that booster shots are in fact needed."

Top dog: Joey Chestnut sets new record at hot dog contest

Chowdown champ Joey "Jaws" Chestnut broke his own record to gulp to a 14th win in the men's Nathan's Famous Hot Dog Eating Contest on Sunday, while Michelle Lesco took the women's title.

Chestnut downed 76 franks and buns in 10 minutes. That's one more than he did in setting the men's record last year, when the contest unfolded without fans because of the coronavirus pandemic. "It just felt good," Chestnut, of Westfield, Indiana, said in an ESPN interview after his win Sunday. "Even if I was uncomfortable, having everybody cheer me and push me, it made me feel good."

Lesco, of Tucson, Arizona, downed 30 3/4 dogs in 10 minutes and called her win "an amazing feeling."

The annual Fourth of July frankfurter fest normally happens outside Nathan's flagship shop in Brooklyn's Coney Island neighborhood. But this year's planning took place amid shifting coronavirus restrictions, and the event was held in a nearby minor league baseball stadium, Maimonides Park, with 5,000 spectators.

— Bulletin wire reports

uals, White House press secretary Jen Psaki has countered that "if individuals are vaccinated in those areas, then they are protected."

Service members and first responders were special guests for the cookout and fireworks viewing at the South Lawn. The outdoor event "is being

done in the right way," White House COVID-19 response coordinator Jeff Zients said in television interviews, and "consistent" with CDC guidelines. The White House was not requiring vaccinations but was asking guests to get a COVID-19 test and to wear a mask if they are not fully vaccinated.

WORLD BRIEFING

Pope hospitalized for intestinal surgery

Pope Francis was hospitalized in Rome on Sunday afternoon for scheduled surgery on his large intestine, the Vatican said. The news came just three hours after Francis had cheerfully greeted the public in St. Peter's Square and told them he will go to Hungary and Slovakia in September.

It was the pope's first known hospital treatment since he was elected to the papacy in 2013.

The Vatican said the 84-year-old pope had been diagnosed with "symptomatic diverticular stenosis of the colon," a reference to a narrowing in the large intestine.

Francis is in generally good health, but did have part of one lung removed as a young man. He also suffers from sciatica, in which a nerve affects the lower back and leg, a painful condition that has forced him

at times to skip scheduled appearances.

A 10th-floor papal suite is kept available at the hospital in case of need.

Taliban seize areas from fleeing Afghan troops

The Taliban's march through northern Afghanistan gained momentum overnight with the capture of several districts from fleeing Afghan forces, several hundred of whom fled across the border into Tajikistan, officials said Sunday.

More than 300 Afghan military personnel crossed from Afghanistan's Badakhshan province as Taliban fighters advanced toward the border, Tajikistan's State Committee for National Security said in a statement. The Afghan troops crossed over at about 6:30 p.m. local time Saturday.

"Guided by the principles of humanism and good neigh-

borliness," the Tajik authorities allowed the retreating Afghan National Defense and Security Forces to cross into Tajikistan, said the statement.

Since mid-April, when President Joe Biden announced the end to Afghanistan's "forever war," the Taliban have made strides throughout the country. But their most significant gains have been in the northern half of the country, a traditional stronghold of the U.S.-allied warlords who helped defeat them in 2001. The Taliban now control roughly a third of all 421 districts and district centers in Afghanistan.

The areas under Taliban control in the north are increasingly strategic, running along Afghanistan's border with central Asian states. Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid confirmed the fall of the districts and said most were without a fight.

— Bulletin wire reports

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