

International

Biden aims \$1.5 trillion budget at health, education, social services

President keeps cap on Pentagon budget at \$715 billion

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden's administration on Friday unveiled a more than \$1.5 trillion budget proposal that would see funding for health, education and social services eclipse defense spending, in a reversal of his predecessor's policies. The discretionary spending request for fiscal year 2022 would allocate \$769.4 billion to non-defense programs, surpassing the \$753 billion apportioned for defense, which was prioritized under Donald Trump but only slightly increased under Biden's proposal. The Biden administration characterized the increase in non-defense spending as necessary to help the country recover from the COVID-19 downturn and create a more equitable economy in the years ahead. "The President's funding request makes things fairer," Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said in a statement.

"It injects capital into communities where capital is usually hard to come by. It will make paying taxes a more seamless process for millions of Americans. And it makes sure that corporations actually pay what they owe." The nearly 16 percent increase in non-defense spending would total 3.3 percent of GDP, about equal to its historical average over the past three decades, Shalanda D. Young, acting director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), said in a letter to lawmakers.

Outside of the Defense Department, Health and Human Services would receive the most funding at \$133.7 billion, a jump of more than 23 percent from the prior fiscal year, which runs from October to September. The Education Department would get a 40.8 percent funding increase that would bring its budget to \$102.8 billion.

"Over the past decade, due in large measure to overly restrictive budget caps, the nation significantly underinvested in core public services, benefits and protections," Young wrote, saying the plan would be a reversal of that austerity.

The budget is a yearly undertaking for US presidents, signaling their major funding priorities, but must be approved by Congress. The plan also proposes a funding increase of more than 10 percent to \$13.3 billion for the US tax authority, Treasury's Internal Revenue Service (IRS), which would help it improve its services and better monitor corporations and high earners.

It also aims \$36.5 billion at schools serving poor populations, \$6.5 billion for federal health research and \$10.7 billion to fight the opioid epidemic. The spending bill will be considered by a Congress where



WASHINGTON: This file photo shows the Pentagon in Washington, DC. US President Joe Biden kept an effective lid on US military spending in his first budget draft, proposing to spend \$715 billion, a marginal hike after sharp increases under predecessor Donald Trump. — AFP

Democrats hold small majorities in the House and the Senate, and where lawmakers currently are debating the \$2 trillion jobs and infrastructure bill Biden unveiled last week.

Patrick Leahy, Democratic chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee, called the proposal's spending "necessary and urgent," and tied caps in federal spending over the last decade to the terrible toll wrought by the Covid-19 pandemic in the United States. "I look forward to receiving the administration's full budget in the coming weeks so that Congress can pass a budget resolution and the Senate Appropriations Committee can begin its work of marking up bills," he said in a statement.

Biden kept an effective lid on US military spending in his first budget draft, proposing to spend \$715 billion, a marginal hike after sharp increases under predecessor Donald Trump. But Republican lawmakers quickly blasted the proposal as weakening the US military in the face of China's strong defense push, and

demanding a larger budget. For fiscal 2022, which starts October 1 this year, Biden asked Congress to allot a total of \$753 billion for defense and national security.

Of that \$715 billion would go to the Pentagon, up from \$704 billion budgeted for the current year but a slight fall when measured in real terms after inflation. Biden's budget supports expansion of the US Navy's fleet, amid concerns of it being outpaced by rival China, which the Defense Department considers its primary challenge. Biden is also proposing to modernize the country's nuclear weaponry and strengthen the delivery systems—bombers, submarines and missiles.

Nearly \$107 billion would go to weapons- and defense-related research and development, the highest level ever, with a growing focus on hypersonic missiles, artificial intelligence, microelectronics and autonomous vehicles. But it also places an emphasis on military operations that acknowledge and address climate change.—AFP

In Houston, a race to vaccinate its student population

HOUSTON: On the campus of Houston University, students meet in small groups, sit alone at computers and attend virtual meetings. It appears they are taking precautions against the coronavirus, but the Texas metropolis is still rushing to get its population of about 300,000 university and college students vaccinated as quickly as possible. "Right now, college students make up a large percentage of super spreaders," said Isaiah Martin, 22, a fourth-year student in political science who is leading a campaign for students to get their shots.

With some 500 new cases a day in April, down from about 2,000 in January, the situation in Houston—the fourth-largest city in the United States—is improving, yet it remains worrying. Where it goes from here will depend in large part on the behavior of students, many of whom are chafing under a year of restrictions and isolation. But a College Pulse survey in January of 1,000 US students found that only 21 percent were not concerned about vaccine safety.

Vaccination competition

At the University of Houston, home to 47,000 students, Martin says his peers still "go out and a lot of time they ignore the guidance from the CDC and other health departments and so they'll go out, they'll party, they'll do things college kids normally do." After more than a year of the pandemic, words of caution are increasingly difficult to heed. That is why the city has organized its "Take Your Best Shot" campaign, a competition between universities to see which can get the most of its current and former students vaccinated.

The competition began March 29, the first day the vaccine was available to all adults, after Texas decided it had sufficiently inoculated its at-risk population.

12 beheaded in Mozambique attack in March

MAPUTO: Twelve decapitated bodies were found after a jihadist raid on the Mozambique town of Palma last month, strewn in front of a hotel where dozens had sought safety, army and private security sources said. Islamic State-linked militants launched coordinated attacks on the northern town on March 24, ransacking buildings and murdering residents as thousands fled into surrounding bush. Close to 200 people, mainly civil servants and foreigners working on a nearby gas project, sheltered in the beachfront Amarula Palma Hotel for several days. Officials claim the town is back under government control and have allowed some media in to report on the aftermath.

Mozambican state television TVM on Wednesday broadcast images of the plundered Amarula, and a local police officer pointing to various spots near the main entrance where he said 12 decapitated bodies were scattered. The officer, Pedro da Silva Negro, told



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Vaccinating students is deemed so important that Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner came to the University of Houston to kick off the campaign.

'Don't even know what I'm missing'

Rice University, the most prestigious school in the Houston area, is not participating in the challenge. It has, however, set up a vaccination center managed by hospital group St. Luke's Health on its campus in the heart of the city. On this April day, several dozen students received their first doses, hoping to put an end to online courses and limited social interactions. "I think online classes have been isolating and we haven't been able to learn as well in our dorm rooms instead of the classroom," said Sarah Sowell, 19, after getting her shot.

First-year students remain the most isolated, having never experienced the highlights of campus life and its close friendships. "It's hard to make friends when you only see them on a Zoom call, they're only little pictures on a screen," said Lillian Cui, 18, who came from Pennsylvania to study planetary science. English student Hannah Hoskins, who also came to Rice at the start of the academic year, finds it "strange to hear these really amazing stories about previous years and I think that's a little difficult to have to be like 'Man, I'm missing out,' but I don't even know what I'm missing."—AFP

reporters he personally "took charge" of burying them under a nearby mango tree. "Their hands were tied and they were in an advanced state of decomposition," he said. The grim finding was later confirmed by a private security source and a military commander. "There were 12 bodies, they were all beheaded, one of my officers was there," Lionel Dyck, owner of Dyck Advisory Group (DAG), a private South African security company contracted to help Mozambique fight the insurgency, told AFP on Friday.—AFP



Internally displaced people (IDP) from Palma gather in the Pemba Sports center to receive humanitarian aid in Pemba. — AFP

News in brief

Biden eyes Supreme Court expansion

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden on Friday established an expert commission to study reforming the powerful US Supreme Court, including the explosive question of expanding its bench. The move follows months of debate over whether Democrats should seek to expand the court beyond its current nine justices, after moves during Donald Trump's presidential term gave the bench a firm conservative majority. The Supreme Court sits as the final arbiter on fundamental American legal matters, which can include minority and LGBTQ rights, racism, the death penalty and electoral controversies—and its justices are appointed for life.—AFP

NASA copter ready for Mars flight

WASHINGTON: The helicopter that NASA has placed on Mars could make its first flight over the Red Planet within two days after a successful initial test of its rotors, the US space agency said Friday. The current plan for the first-ever attempt at powered, controlled flight on another planet is for the four-pound (1.8 kilogram) helicopter, dubbed the Ingenuity, to take off from Mars' Jezero Crater today at 10:54 pm US eastern time (0254 GMT Monday) and hover 10 feet (3 meters) above the surface for a half-minute, NASA said. "The helicopter is good, it's looking healthy," said Tim Canham, Ingenuity operations lead, in a press conference.—AFP

Guido accuses govt of vaccine lies

CARACAS: Opposition leader Juan Guaido on Friday accused Venezuela's government of lying about the country's lack of coronavirus vaccines, denying regime claims that sanctions are to blame. The government claimed on Wednesday that it would have already purchased the 30 million vaccines it needs but for economic sanctions, led by the United States. "I won't tire myself out repeating it... faced with the official lie about the externalization of responsibilities: (President) Nicolas Maduro is the only person responsible" for the lack of vaccines, Guaido told a press conference in the capital Caracas.—AFP

Biden's Mexico border tsar to quit

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden's top official for the Mexican border, where US authorities are struggling to stop a huge flow of undocumented migrants, will step down, the White House said Friday. Roberta Jacobson, officially known as coordinator for the Southwest Border at the National Security Council, will leave "at the end of this month," National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said in a statement. According to Sullivan, Jacobson had committed to serving only for Biden's first 100 days, which expire on April 30. However the departure comes as the administration is struggling to handle waves of migrants—and to fend off criticism that it has lost control of the situation.—AFP

Canada election talk heats up at conventions

OTTAWA: Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has rejected going to the polls during the pandemic, but Canada's capital was abuzz Friday with election chatter as political parties firmed up planks at policy conventions. It comes after last month's virtual convention by the main opposition Conservatives, when rookie leader Erin O'Toole's pleaded for members to accept the reality of climate change if they were to have any hope of victory at the ballot box. His appeal fell on deaf ears.

That left an opening for the Liberals, who are meeting through Saturday, to drive Trudeau's proposed stepped-up climate agenda that surveys show is already gaining traction with voters. The New Democrats are also holding a convention this weekend to hammer out strategies to boost the fourth-ranked leftist party's electoral fortunes.

Trudeau, whose party was returned to office with a minority government in October 2019, was scheduled to give a keynote address at the convention later. Former central banker Mark Carney, meanwhile, made his hotly anticipated political debut at the convention late Friday. "I'll do whatever I can to support the Liberal Party in our efforts to build a better future for Canadians," he said.

Although coy about his political aspirations since returning to Canada after serving as governor of the Bank of England, he is considered by some insiders as a potential successor to Trudeau.

Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland told delegates at the opening of the Liberals' convention late Thursday that the pandemic revealed social inequities that urgently need addressing. Liberals are to debate a universal basic income in order to alleviate poverty, and a proposal to pin Canada's economic recovery on massive clean energy investments.—AFP



ATHENS: Greek police experts investigate near the house of Giorgos Karaivaz, a veteran crime journalist, after he was shot dead in Athens Friday.—AFP

Greek PM demands swift probe into journalist's murder

ATHENS: Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis yesterday demanded the "swift resolution" of a probe into a crime journalist's murder already condemned by leading EU officials, political parties and media unions. Mitsotakis had summoned his police minister Michalis Chrysochoidis to a meeting on the case yesterday, the PM's office said. Giorgos Karaivaz, who worked for private TV station Star and also ran the news blog bloko.gr, was shot several times Friday as he exited his car outside his house in the southern Athens district of Alimos, witnesses said.

He had just returned home from work. A police source told AFP the 52-year-old journalist had been shot by two men on a motorbike. Seventeen bullet casings were recovered from the scene. The murder was rapidly condemned by the European Commission and the Council of Europe commissioner for human rights.

"Murdering a journalist is a despicable, cowardly act," Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen tweeted Friday. "Europe stands for freedom. And freedom of press may be the most sacred of all. Journalists must be able to work safely. My thoughts are with the family of George Karaivaz. I hope the criminals are soon brought to justice," she said.

Karaivaz had worked for some of Greece's leading newspapers and TV channels in a 32-year career. "He) was one of the most experienced crime reporters in the field... and was held in high regard by colleagues," the Esia union of Athens daily newspaper journalists said in a statement. The federation of Greek police officers said Karaivaz was personally interested in improving working conditions for law enforcement and was "strongly critical of anybody" standing in their union's way. While Greek media offices are frequently targeted in firebomb and vandalism attacks, journalist killings are rare.

Some journalists request police protection after receiving threats, but Karaivaz was unguarded. "It was not his style to request protection," a police officer who knew Karaivaz well told AFP, speaking on condition of anonymity. The shooting occurred at a time when Greek authorities had received criticism for allocating too many police guards to a controversial TV presenter. And in July, tabloid newspaper editor Stefanos Chios survived after being shot in the neck and chest by a hooded man outside his home. The case is still under investigation.—AFP