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U.S. places troops on alert over Ukraine

8,500 service members are on notice amid possible Russian military move

By Robert Burns and Lorne Cook
ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — At President Joe Biden's direction, the Pentagon is putting about 8,500 U.S.-based

troops on heightened alert for potential deployment to Europe to reassure allies amid rising fears of a possible Russian military move on Ukraine.

Pentagon press secretary John Kirby said Monday

that no final decisions had been made on deployments, which he said would happen only if NATO decides to activate a rapid-response force "or if other situations develop" in connection with tensions over Russia's military buildup along Ukraine's border.

"What this is about is reassurance to our NATO al-

lies," Kirby said, adding that no troops are intended for deployment to Ukraine itself.

Kirby said Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin recommended to Biden that about 8,500 troops be ordered to prepare for potential deployment to Europe in light of signs that Russian President Vladimir Putin is

not de-escalating his military pressure on Ukraine. Kirby said he was not prepared to identify the U.S.-based units because they were still being notified.

"We've always said we would reinforce our allies on the eastern flank, and those conversations and discussions have certainly been part of what our na-

tional security officials have been discussing with their counterparts now for several weeks," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said.

Later Monday, Biden held a video call with several European leaders on the Russian military buildup and potential responses to *Russia continues on A7*

A test for colleges



Photos by Yi-Chin Lee / Staff photographer

Campus tour groups of mostly masked prospective students check out the University of Houston campus on Monday.

Schools seek to manage, not stamp out, COVID as omicron drives spike

By Samantha Ketterer
STAFF WRITER

The omicron variant of the coronavirus arrived at Houston-area universities just before students returned for the spring semester — but still drove COVID-19 infections to record numbers while producing infection rates that surpassed the delta surge, the schools reported.

The campus surges are appearing to peak, consistent with Texas Medical Center data showing declines in daily testing positivity rates at hospi-



Students line up at a COVID-19 testing site at Prairie View A&M University on Monday.

tals. Yet with infections at universities remaining higher than usual, the highly contagious omicron variant is ushering in a new phase in which many higher education institutions focus on managing rather than eliminating the virus.

"We're moving from treating COVID as a pandemic to treating it more as endemic," said Kevin Kirby, Rice University's vice president for administration. "It's going to be with us for some time to come, but we know how to live with it much better."

Colleges continues on A8

Omicron variant loosens grip on Houston

Transmissions down, but hospitals still full

By Nora Mishanec
STAFF WRITER

Omicron's swift and sudden surge may have peaked, experts said Monday, but hospitals are likely to remain full in the coming weeks, with the highly contagious coronavirus strain not expected to recede until March.

Two key metrics — transmission rate and wastewater tracking — indicate the variant may be loosening its grip on the Houston area.

Texas Medical Center records show positive case rates are declining. Around 9,000 people tested positive for COVID each day last week in Greater Houston, down about 33 percent from the previous week, when the region averaged 13,400 new cases daily, according to TMC data.

But hospitalizations and deaths lag behind new infections, so health care workers still have a challenging couple of weeks ahead, said Dr. David Perse, Houston's chief medical officer.

"It appears that we may have hit a peak," Perse said. "However, our numbers are still really, really high. I hesitate for anyone hearing that we may have peaked to think that it's over. It is far from over."

Intensive care units around Texas are at 92 percent capacity, among the highest levels recorded since the pandemic began. The number of people admitted to TMC hospitals each day is on par with or above the worst of every previous surge. Health care workers are exhausted. Many have quit.

"We knew there was an element of fatigue among health care workers, but the impact of omicron has brought that even more to light," Perse said.

Houston's declining rate of transmission — a statistic used to gauge how likely an infected person is to spread their illness to others — offers some hope. The rate of transmission fell below 1.0 last week for the first time since mid-December, according to TMC data. That means each infected Houstonian is on average spreading the virus to one person or less.

Wastewater tracing, one of the *Omicron continues on A8*

Despite law, disabled Texans still at risk in disasters

By St. John BARNED-SMITH
STAFF WRITER

Gary Lynn, 28, lives in Spring and has cerebral palsy severe enough that he has limited mobility and needs a wheelchair to get around. When the deep freeze descended on Texas in early 2021, he and millions of other Texans lost power.

For Lynn and other disa-

bled Texans, the extreme weather was more than an inconvenience. It was life-threatening. A law passed later in 2021 was supposed to help ensure that disabled Texans got help in times of emergency.

But as winter again descends on Texas, a Houston Chronicle investigation found that city officials are confused about how to im-

Registry continues on A7



For many medically fragile Texans, the freeze was especially dangerous, as it cut off power for vital equipment.

Annie Mulligan / Contributor

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