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Anger as PM backs Covid inquiry but not until 2022

Bereaved families and health experts condemn start date as unjustifiable

Aubrey Allegretti

One of the widest-ranging public inquiries in UK history will be launched into the government's handling of the Covid pandemic - but Boris Johnson faced criticism last

night for delaying it until spring 2022.

The independent statutory inquiry, with the power to compel witnesses, will "rigorously and candidly" explore mistakes made by the government in Westminster as well as the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the prime minister said.

It comes after the Guardian highlighted calls for an inquiry from the Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice group, frontline health workers and public figures including politicians, a former head of the

civil service and the archbishop of Canterbury. Ministers insisted an immediate inquiry would be wrong given the UK was still in lockdown at the time.

Work will begin to appoint a chair and other potential panellists, and draw up terms of reference, with some hopeful the inquiry will be led by a judge. It is likely to start in a year's time, Johnson told the Commons.

Experts said it could take three to six months to establish so could be up and running much sooner than spring 2022 if desired. Lord Falconer, who

passed the Inquiries Act as lord chancellor, said the government would be confident the pandemic inquiry will not conclude before the next general election, expected in 2023.

After the UK saw one of the world's worst Covid death tolls, surpassing 150,000 fatalities, experts and MPs have pushed for an inquiry to investigate whether ministers followed scientific advice on lockdowns and other decisions; the level of support provided to disadvantaged groups and frontline workers; 8 →

Greenhouse gases are eroding the stratosphere

Exclusive
Damian Carrington
Environment editor

Humanity's enormous emissions of greenhouse gases are shrinking the stratosphere, a study has revealed.

The thickness of the atmospheric layer has contracted by 400 metres since the 1980s, the researchers found, and will thin by about another kilometre by 2080 unless there are significant cuts in emissions. The changes have the potential to affect satellite operations, the GPS navigation system and radio communications.

The discovery is the latest to reveal the impact of humans on the planet. Last month, scientists showed the climate crisis had shifted the Earth's axis as the melting of glaciers redistributes weight around the globe.

The stratosphere extends from about 20km to 60km above the Earth's surface. Below is the troposphere, in which humans live, and here carbon dioxide heats and expands the air. This pushes up the lower boundary of the stratosphere. But, in addition, when CO₂ enters the stratosphere it actually cools the air, causing it to contract.

The shrinking stratosphere is a stark signal of the climate emergency and the planetary-scale influence that humanity now exerts, according to Juan Añel, at the University of Vigo, Ourense in Spain, 6 →

We attack until there is 'complete quiet' - Israel

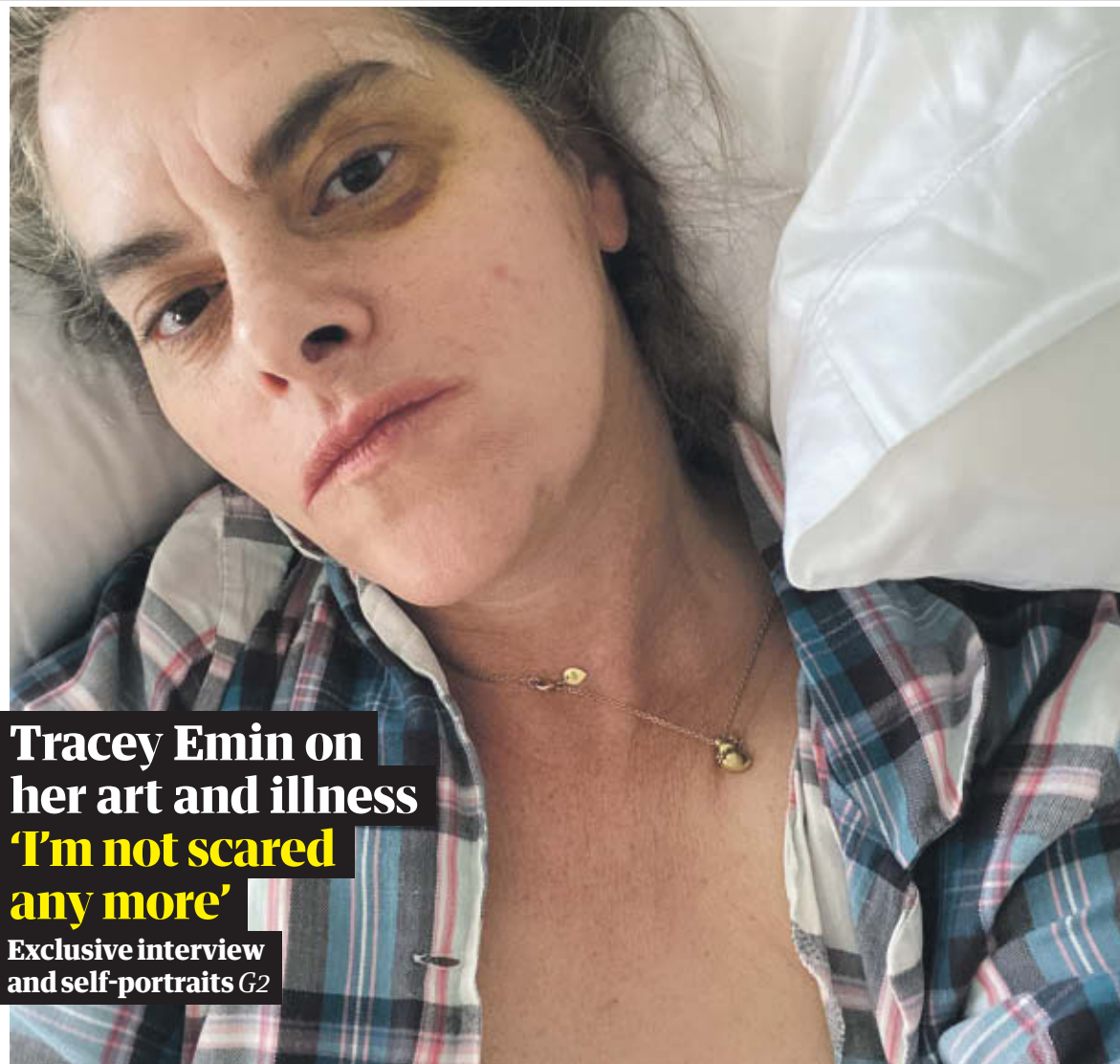
Oliver Holmes *Jerusalem*
Harriet Sherwood
Julian Borger *Washington*

Israel will not stop its military operation in Gaza until "complete quiet" has been achieved, the country's defence minister said yesterday, as airstrikes and rocket fire continued throughout the day.

With the death toll from the most serious conflict between Israel and the Palestinians for nine years mounting, international leaders called for restraint amid fears of a full-scale war.

The Israeli military said it had killed four senior Hamas commanders and a dozen more Hamas operatives in a series of strikes, and had undertaken a "complex and first-of-its-kind operation" jointly with the Shin Bet security service. The dead included Bassem Issa, the Gaza City Brigade commander, the head of the cyber-command and the head of Hamas's production network, said a security agency statement.

The Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, 2 →



Tracey Emin on her art and illness
'I'm not scared any more'

Exclusive interview and self-portraits G2

PHOTOGRAPH: TRACEY EMIN

Radovan Karadžić
War criminal heading for UK to finish life sentence

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Greenhouse gases are reducing the stratosphere, study reveals

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who was part of the research team. "It is shocking," he said. "This proves we are messing with the atmosphere up to 60 kilometres."

Scientists the troposphere was growing in height already as carbon emissions rose and they had

hypothesised that the stratosphere was shrinking. But the study is the first to demonstrate this and shows it has been contracting around the globe since at least the 1980s, when satellite data was first gathered.

The ozone layer, which absorbs UV rays from the sun, is in the stratosphere and researchers had thought

ozone losses in recent decades could be to blame for the shrinking. Less ozone means less heating in the stratosphere. But the new research shows it is the rise of CO₂ that is behind the steady contraction of the stratosphere, not ozone levels, which started to rebound after the 1989 Montreal treaty banned CFCs.

The study, published in the journal *Environmental Research Letters*, reached its conclusions using the small set of satellite observations taken since the 1980s in combination with multiple climate models, which

included the complex chemical interactions that occur in the atmosphere.

"It may affect satellite trajectories, orbital life-times, and retrievals [...] the propagation of radio waves, and eventually the overall performance of the Global Positioning System and other space-based navigational systems," the researchers said.

Prof Paul Williams, at the University of Reading in the UK, who was not involved in the research, said: "Some scientists have started calling the upper atmosphere the 'ignosphere' because it is so poorly studied."

"This new paper will strengthen the case for better observations of this distant but critically important part of the atmosphere."

The dominance of humanity activities on the planet has led scientists to recommend the declaration of a new geological epoch: the Anthropocene.

Among the suggested markers of the era are the radioactive elements scattered by 1950s nuclear tests and domestic chicken bones. Other scientists have suggested plastic pollution as a marker of a plastic age, to follow the bronze and iron ages.



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Exam papers being used for A-level and GCSE grading sold for £1 online

Sally Weale

Education correspondent

GCSE and A-level papers from last year's cancelled exams, which are being used by many schools in England this summer, are being sold to pupils on social media for as little as £1, the Guardian has learned.

The 2020 papers, which were not sat last summer after exams were cancelled as a result of the pandemic, are being offered on social media websites with headlines such as: "Sitting your GCSEs? Scared you're going to fail?" and "2020 papers leaked. Easiest 9 ever."

On one site, a seller offers AQA's 2020 GCSE biology paper 2, complete with the mark scheme. "OK how do I get them," the purchaser asks. "Pay. By PayPal," comes the response. Papers from other exam boards are also on offer.

With traditional exams cancelled again this year, schools in England are using a range of assessments – including exams, coursework and mocks – to draw up grades for this year's cohort. There are fears that the reliability of grades could be undermined by pupils getting hold of papers in advance.

The mother of a 16-year-old boy working towards his GCSEs told the Guardian: "Like many others, my son's school has chosen to use last year's GCSE papers as a large part of the required evidence for this year's centre-assessed grades."

"The exam boards have assured the schools that the papers are 'secure' and are not in general circulation and are therefore safe to be used as exam papers."

"Last night I received an email from my son's school to say they had become aware he had been able to get prior access to the AQA biology paper 2 that he sat yesterday morning and as a result they were going to make him sit an entirely new exam on his own next week."

"I did my own research and found that all of the past papers from AQA and other exam boards are readily available on TikTok and Instagram – many for free and some for sale for around £1-£10 a paper."

"If this year's GCSE results are based on leaked exam papers then the whole system for centre-assessed grades is not working and the results will be completely unreliable."

A spokesperson for the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ), which represents UK exam boards, said summer 2020 papers had been used for the autumn 2020 series, which were sat by a small number of students who were unhappy with their centre-assessed grades.

"Exams are cancelled this year; instead teachers will be determining grades from a range of evidence, and so there is no advantage to gain for students who are buying or gaining access to exam papers online," the spokesperson said.

"We would strongly encourage students to use only publicly available materials via our websites, in addition to those provided by their exam centre."

"Nonetheless, exam boards regard the sale or exchange of any of our assessment materials as unacceptable and take action to stop this wherever possible."

Geoff Barton, the general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, said: "Everybody will be trying to do their best to assess their students as fairly as possible, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach."

"In all circumstances, it is important that students observe the rules that are set by the school or college. We would discourage anyone from buying or selling papers."



If this year's GCSE results are based on leaked exam papers then the results will be completely unreliable'

Mother of boy working on his GCSEs