

Groton Daily Independent

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**Card Shower
for
Dee Baily's
90th Birthday**
**Send to:
715 W. Willow
Groton, SD 57445
Her birthday is Dec. 21**

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton
The recycling trailer is located at 10 East Railroad Ave. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.

Dakota Brush

Brooms, Brushes, Mops, Can Liners, Paper Products.

Get Ready for Spring With
Wash Brushes & Squeegees

397-9337

104 N. Main, Groton

Groton Area Schedule of Events

Thursday, December 20, 2018

4:00pm: Basketball: Girls 7th/8th Game vs. Ipswich @ Ipswich High School (7th Grade 4pm 8th Grade 5pm)

6:30pm: Basketball: Girls Varsity Game vs. Ipswich @ Ipswich

Friday, December 21, 2018

End of 2nd Quarter

1:00pm: Elementary Christmas Concert at Groton Area High School

2:00pm: Early Dismissal Groton Area School District

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It's Girls' Basketball Action on GDILIVE.COM



**Ipswich
Tigers**

VS



Groton Area Tigers

Thursday, Dec. 20, 2018
Varsity Game at 8:00 p.m.
at Ipswich

This GDILIVE.COM event is sponsored by

Aberdeen
Chrysler Center

901 Auto Plaza Drive
Aberdeen, SD

800.874.9173

www.aberdeenchrysler.com

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Groton's Angel Tree lady for 13 years, Tina Kosel) was out making deliveries this week.



Work has been progressing on the new fence being installed at Falk Field at the Groton Baseball Complex. (Photo from Groton Baseball/Softball Foundation Facebook Page)



Groton Community Transit invites you to their

CHRISTMAS BAKE SALE

Thursday, December 20

9:00am - 4:00pm

Main Street Groton

Coffee, cider & goodies served

Door Prizes

If you would like to donate baked goods, please call the Transit at 397-8661. Thanks.

Homecare Services Caregivers

Flexible, part time positions available in the Groton area. Home Care Services is looking for friendly dependable people to provide care and companionship for elderly and disabled people in their homes. You will be assisting our clients with personal care needs, meal preparations, light housekeeping, errands and other tasks. If you have a passion for helping others and need a flexible schedule, please call our office at (605) 225-1076 or 1-800-899-2578. (1218.0101)

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Today in Weather History

December 20, 1991: Light freezing drizzle and freezing rain developed over northern South Dakota from Timber Lake to Webster. Numerous car accidents were attributed to slippery conditions. The Aberdeen Police Department reported 24 accidents in Aberdeen, but only one resulted in an injury. Numerous businesses closed and schools were canceled.

December 20, 2008: Arctic air combined with blustery northwest winds brought extreme wind chills to central and northeast South Dakota and west central Minnesota from the late afternoon of the 20th until the afternoon of the 21st. Wind chills of 35 below to 45 below zero were common across the area.

1836 - A famous cold wave occurred in central Illinois. A cold front with 70 mph winds swept through at Noon dropping the temperature from 40 degrees to near zero in a matter of minutes. Many settlers froze to death. Folklore told of chickens frozen in their tracks and men frozen to saddles. Ice in streams reportedly froze to six inches in a few hours. (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1942 - An early cold wave sent the temperature plunging to 3 degrees below zero at Nantucket, MA, and to 11 degrees below zero at Boston MA. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Heavy snow fell in the northern mountains of Colorado, with 15 inches reported in the Mary Jane ski area. Strong and gusty winds prevailed from the Northern High Plains to the Great Lakes. Winds gusted to 54 mph at Buffalo NY, and reached 66 mph at Livingston MT. Rain, freezing rain, sleet and snow fell across New England, with up to seven inches of snow in Maine. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Strong southerly winds ahead of a cold front in the central U.S. gusted to 70 mph at Indianapolis IN. The high winds toppled a masonry wall killing a construction worker. Low pressure and a trailing cold front brought rain and snow and high winds to the western U.S. Winds gusted to 90 mph at the Callahan Ranch south of Reno NV. Soda Springs, in the Sierra Nevada Range of California, received 17 inches of snow in less than 24 hours. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Brutal northwest winds ushered bitter cold arctic air into the north central U.S. International Falls, MN, and Warroad, MN, tied for honors as the cold spot in the nation with morning lows of 34 degrees below zero. Minot ND reported a wind chill reading of 81 degrees below zero. Squalls produced more heavy snow in the Great Lakes Region. Erie PA received 21 inches of snow, including four inches in one hour, to bring their total snow cover to 39 inches, an all-time record for that location. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

2006 - A major winter storm affected Colorado, dumping several feet of snow on areas of the Rocky Mountains. The snowstorm temporarily closed the Denver International Airport.

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Today

Tonight

Friday

Friday
Night

Saturday



Mostly Cloudy

Partly Cloudy

Partly Sunny

Chance Snow

Partly Sunny

High: 38 °F

Low: 20 °F


High: 37 °F

Low: 25 °F

High: 36 °F

Highs: Lower 30s to Upper 40s
(warmest in central SD)
Lows: 20s

Dry and Mild Today

 National Weather Service Aberdeen, SD

Updated: 12/20/2018 4:48 AM Central

Published on: 12/20/2018 at 4:55AM

Clouds in eastern SD and western MN this morning will slowly exit to the east this afternoon. Otherwise, mild and dry conditions are expected today. Breezy winds will diminish this evening. Some fog development will be possible overnight as high pressure briefly settles over the region.

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Yesterday's Weather

High Outside Temp: 46 °F at 1:18 PM

Low Outside Temp: 25 °F at 1:27 AM

High Gust: 29 mph at 8:27 PM

Precip: 0.00

Today's Info

Record High: 60° in 1893

Record Low: -29° in 1916

Average High: 24°F

Average Low: 4°F

Average Precip in Dec.: 0.31

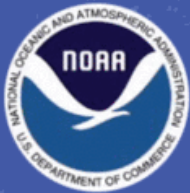
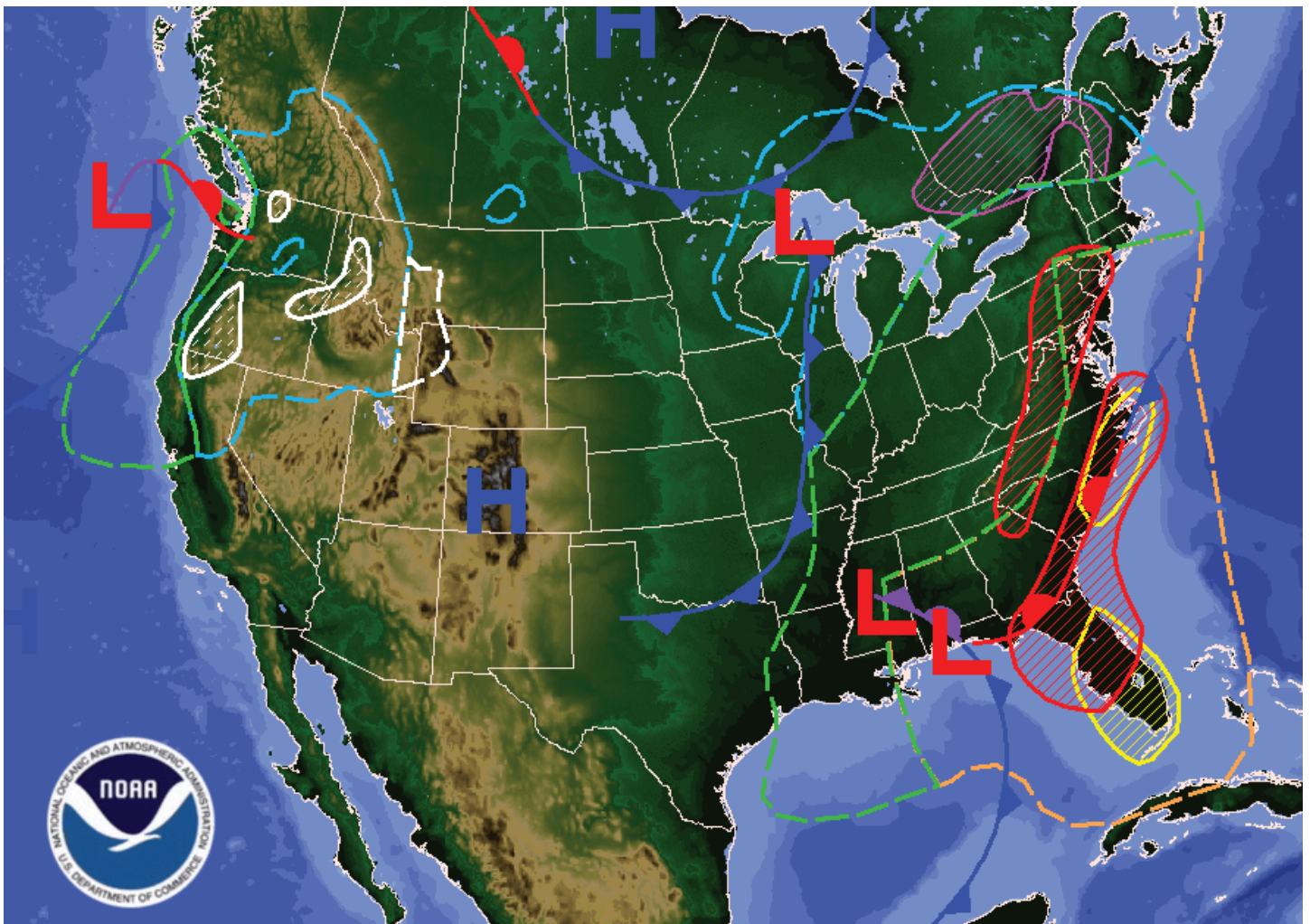
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 21.51

Precip Year to Date: 15.81

Sunset Tonight: 4:53 p.m.

Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:11 a.m.



Day 1 National Forecast Chart

Valid Thu, Dec 20, 2018, issued 3:43 AM EST
DOC/NOAA/NWS/NCEP/Weather Prediction Center
Prepared by Snell with WPC/SPC/NHC forecasts

Rain
Rain and T'Storms
Rain and Snow
Snow
Flash Flooding Possible (hatched)
Severe T'Storms Possible (hatched)
Freezing Rain Possible (hatched)
Heavy Snow Possible (hatched)



THE JOY THAT COMES FROM CHRISTMAS

A young run-away girl collapsed on the streets of a large city at the beginning of the Christmas season. She was rushed to a hospital, placed in intensive care and finally made it to a room where she made slow progress in regaining her health.

One evening a group of carolers stopped by her room and sang the beautiful songs that describe the birth of Jesus. After they sang, a young lady approached her bed and asked if she knew the Baby that they sang about.

Quietly, barely above a whisper she said, I heard about Him when I went to Sunday school. But dont remember too much about Him.

The young lady reminded her of the story and meaning of the birth of Jesus and the plan of salvation. She accepted the Lord as her Savior.

Finally, it was time for her to leave and a nurse said, Well, now that youre better, its time for you to leave.

Happily she said, Yes, but Im not leaving alone. Im taking Jesus with me. Do you know Jesus?

Oh, yes, replied the nurse, in a grumpy voice.

Well, then, she asked, why arent you filled with joy like I am? If you truly know Jesus, youll be happy all the time.

David said, Restore the joy of Your salvation!

Prayer: Lord, sometimes we surrender our joy to the stress and strains of life. Come now and return the joy we once had when we accepted Christ. In Jesus Name, Amen.

Scripture for Today: Psalm 51:12 Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, And uphold me by Your generous Spirit.

2018 Groton SD Community Events

- Groton Lion's Club Bingo- Wednesday Nights 6:30pm at the Groton Legion (Year Round)
- Nov./Dec./Jan./Feb./Mar. Groton Lion's Club Wheel of Meat- Saturday Nights 7pm at the Groton Legion (Fall/Winter Months)
- 1/27/2019 Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm
- 4/13/2019 Easter Egg Hunt (Saturday a week before Easter Weekend)
- 5/4/2019 Spring City-Wide Rummage Sales (1st Saturday in May)
- 5/27/2019 Groton American Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Program at the Cemetery, Lunch to follow at the American Legion (Memorial Day)
- Transit Fundraiser (Middle Thursday in June)
- SDSU Golf at Olive Grove
- 6/15/2019 Triathlon (Saturday before Father's Day)
- 7/4/2019 Firecracker Golf Tourney (4th of July)
- 7/14/2019 Summer Fest
- 9/7/2019 Fall City-Wide Rummage Sales (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
- 10/12/2019 Pumpkin Fest (Saturday before Columbus Day)
- 10/11/2019 Lake Region Marching Band Festival (2nd Friday in October)
- 10/31/2018 Trunk or Treat (Halloween)
- 11/10/2018 Groton American Legion Post #39 Turkey Shoot (Saturday closest to Veteran's Day)
- 12/01/2018 Olive Grove Golf Course 2018 Holiday Party
- Best Ball Golf Tourney
- SDSU Golf Tourney
- Sunflower Golf Tourney
- Santa Claus Day
- Fireman's Stag
- Tour of Homes
- Crazy Dayz/Open Houses
- School Events

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News from the Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) _ These South Dakota lotteries were drawn Wednesday:

Dakota Cash
17-19-20-22-24
(seventeen, nineteen, twenty, twenty-two, twenty-four)
Estimated jackpot: \$20,000

Lotto America
10-12-13-34-52, Star Ball: 9, ASB: 2
(ten, twelve, thirteen, thirty-four, fifty-two; Star Ball: nine; ASB: two)
Estimated jackpot: \$12.63 million

Mega Millions
Estimated jackpot: \$305 million

Powerball
15-29-31-37-43, Powerball: 16, Power Play: 2
(fifteen, twenty-nine, thirty-one, thirty-seven, forty-three; Powerball: sixteen; Power Play: two)
Estimated jackpot: \$262 million

Noem to appoint farmer, past lawmaker as ag secretary

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Gov.-elect Kristi Noem is appointing a farmer and former state lawmaker to serve as state Agriculture secretary.

Noem announced Wednesday that Kim Vanneman will be appointed to the cabinet post. A spokeswoman for Noem says Vanneman will be the state's first female Agriculture secretary.

She's currently co-owner of Vanneman Farms in Ideal and a director for Farm Credit Services of America.

Noem will be sworn in Jan. 5. Vanneman was a state representative from 2007-13 and served on the Education and Agriculture and Natural Resources committees.

Noem says Vanneman shares her vision for developing the state's agricultural economy and allowing more young people to thrive as farmers and ranchers. Noem says Vanneman is a "fierce advocate" for agriculture.

Vanneman says it's an honor to work with Noem to add value to commodities grown in South Dakota and expand working lands conservation.

South Dakota bill would allow political apparel at polls

By JAMES NORD, Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota voters would be allowed to wear political clothing and buttons while casting their ballots under a bill set to be debated during the state's upcoming legislative session.

The bill's sponsors contend it's a free speech issue, saying they've heard from people who have run into trouble at the polls while wearing political attire. Republican Rep. Drew Dennert, a sponsor, told The Associated Press this week that as long as people aren't being disruptive, they should be able to wear their t-shirts and buttons, cast their votes and leave.

Dennert said a friend voting in the 2016 presidential general election had to turn inside out a shirt sup-

porting a candidate who hadn't survived the primary and wasn't on the ballot. Dennert said he thought that went "a little bit far."

"I think we probably can loosen it up as long as there's not people who are trying to persuade you how to vote in the polling place," Dennert said. "I don't see how if someone's wearing a t-shirt or a campaign button, how that's going to negatively affect anything within the polling place."

The 2019 legislative session begins Jan. 8.

GOP Sen. Stace Nelson, the bill's main sponsor, said a U.S. Supreme Court ruling earlier this year striking down Minnesota's broad restrictions on voters wearing political hats, T-shirts and pins to the polls provided "the needed boost" to roll back South Dakota's law. Most states restrict what people can wear when they vote, but Minnesota's restraints were some of the broadest. The high court ruling did say states can place limits on such apparel.

Nelson said supporters are trying to educate their colleagues that South Dakota's law is unconstitutional and that lawmakers need to repeal portions of it and "get back to respecting the voters' right to freedom of speech."

Right now, the law says people can't display campaign posters, signs or "other campaign materials" in a polling place or within 100 feet of its entrance.

The bill would allow voters to wear political clothing and buttons to the polls while retaining the prohibition on posters and signs. Dennert said people might be more excited to go to vote and wear their shirts and buttons while casting their ballots.

Minnehaha County Auditor Bob Litz opposes the plan, saying the changes would make some voters uncomfortable. He said current law is fair and applies to everyone.

"It's hard enough to do elections without monkeying around with something like this," Litz said.

Utility proposes new Cheyenne-area wind farm

CHEYENNE, Wyo. (AP) — A utility proposes to build a wind farm in Wyoming to serve commercial electricity customers.

Rapid City, South Dakota-based Black Hills Energy says the 40-megawatt Corriedale Wind Energy Project would be built west of Cheyenne.

Black Hills Energy outlined plans for the \$57 million wind farm in a filing with the Wyoming Public Service Commission on Monday.

The wind farm is part of a program that would enable local commercial utility customers to get up to all of their electricity from renewable sources. The Wyoming Tribune Eagle reports the wind farm would be built by the fall of 2020 if approved.

Black Hills Energy and subsidiaries already operate 89 megawatts of wind-generation facilities serving utility customers in Colorado.

Information from: Wyoming Tribune Eagle, <http://www.wyomingnews.com>

South Dakota driver shot, killed on I70 in Missouri

BOONVILLE, Mo. (AP) — Authorities have determined that a South Dakota driver who was found dead after a crash on Interstate 70 in central Missouri was fatally shot.

The Missouri State Highway Patrol announced Wednesday the cause of death for 40-year-old Melissa Peskey, of Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

The patrol says Peskey was found dead in the driver's seat at 10:30 p.m. on Dec. 23 in Missouri's Cooper County. An autopsy was conducted this week. The patrol says it indicates that she was killed by a weapon that was fired outside her vehicle.

The patrol says the investigation is ongoing. The release didn't say whether anyone had been arrested, and a patrol spokesman didn't immediately return a phone message seeking comment.

Noem to appoint former county commissioner to House seat

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — Gov.-elect Kristi Noem will name a former Meade County commissioner to fill the western South Dakota state House seat vacant after former Rep. Chuck Turbiville's death.

Noem announced Wednesday that she plans to appoint Dayle Hammock, of Spearfish, to the District 31 House seat. Hammock will serve in Pierre during the 2019 and 2020 sessions.

Noem's office says Hammock has worked in law enforcement for over four decades. He has also served on the Meade County Commission, the county's planning commission and the Ellsworth Task Force.

Noem says Hammock's involvement in his community and service-oriented leadership position him to succeed in the Legislature. Hammock's official appointment will be Jan. 7.

Turbiville died in October and was re-elected posthumously. The 75-year-old Republican lawmaker had been mayor of Deadwood for six years and served 10 years in the Legislature.

Distracted driver crashes into Sioux Falls police squad car

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A driver who authorities say was distracted rear-ended an occupied Sioux Falls police squad car as it was at a stop light.

The crash happened late Tuesday.

Authorities say both the 24-year-old driver and the police officer were taken to the hospital for injuries that were not life threatening. The driver was cited for careless driving and other violations.

China blasts US media reports of forced work at Muslim camp

By KEN MORITSUGU, Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — The Chinese government lashed out Thursday at recent U.S. media reports about forced labor of mostly ethnic Muslim detainees in China's far western Xinjiang region.

The stories are "a malicious attack that severely distorts the fact," Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said at a daily news briefing in response to a question from the state-run People's Daily newspaper.

"It goes totally against the professional ethics of journalism," she continued, before invoking President Donald Trump. "No wonder the U.S. leader has criticized the behavior of some U.S. media."

The Associated Press and others have reported that Muslims detained in internment camps have in some cases been forced to work in factories. The AP found that clothing made in one camp had been shipped to an American sportswear company that supplies universities, colleges and schools.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection said Tuesday it is reviewing information published this week by The New York Times, The Washington Post and The Associated Press that "for the first time appears to link the internment camps identified in Western China to the importation of goods produced by forced labor." It is against U.S. law to import products of forced labor.

Hua said China has abolished re-education through labor and described the camps as vocational training centers that help families shake off poverty. The trainees participate voluntarily, she said, contradicting former detainees and friends and relatives of detainees who have told the AP that they have no choice.

"I would like to ask the relevant U.S. media, which criticize and demonize China's efforts in fighting terrorism and extremism and in poverty relief, what they have done in the face of 45 million Americans living in poverty and the severe discrimination issues at home," she said.

China has turned Xinjiang, home to the predominantly Muslim Uighur ethnic minority, into a virtual police state to prevent violent extremism. It has locked up as many as 1 million people, by some estimates, in camps where they are forced to give up their language and their religion and subject to political indoctrination.

US ally in Syria says pullout will aid IS, cause instability

By ZEINA KARAM and SARAH EL DEEB, Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — The United States' main ally in Syria on Thursday rejected President Donald Trump's claim that Islamic State militants have been defeated and warned that the withdrawal of American troops would lead to a resurgence of the extremist group.

The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces said in a statement that a premature U.S. pullout would have dangerous repercussions and a destabilizing effect on the entire region.

"The war against terrorism has not ended and (the Islamic State group) has not been defeated," the statement said, adding that the fight against IS was at a "decisive" stage that requires even more support from the U.S.-led coalition. It was the first official comment by the group on Trump's surprise announcement.

Trump's decision to withdraw troops from Syria has rattled Washington's Kurdish allies, who are its most reliable partner in the country and among the most effective ground forces battling IS. With U.S. air support, the Kurds drove IS from much of northern and eastern Syria in a costly four-year campaign.

The announcement of a pullout is widely seen as an abandonment of a loyal ally.

"The decision to pull out under these circumstances will lead to a state of instability and create a political and military void in the region and leave its people between the claws of enemy forces," the SDF statement said.

Kurdish officials and commanders met into the night, discussing their responses to the decision, local residents said Thursday. A war monitor said among the options seriously discussed was releasing thousands of Islamic State militants and their families from various nationalities who are being detained in SDF-run prisons and camps. It was not clear whether any decision was immediately taken, and SDF commanders were not immediately available for comment.

Arin Sheikmos, a Kurdish journalist and commentator, said "we have every right to be afraid."

"If the Americans pull out and leave us to the Turks or the (Syrian) regime our destiny will be like the Kurds of Iraqi Kurdistan in 1991 — million of refugees, there will be massacres. Neither the regime, not Iran nor Turkey, will accept our presence here," he told the AP.

The U.S. announcement came at a particularly tense moment in northern Syria. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has repeatedly threatened to launch a new offensive against the Kurds but in recent days had stepped up the rhetoric, threatening an assault could begin "at any moment."

Turkey views the People's Protection Units, or YPG, the main component of the Syrian Democratic Forces, as a terrorist group and an extension of the insurgency within its borders. U.S. support for the group has strained ties between the two NATO allies.

In northeastern Syria, Kurdish fighters have been digging trenches and defensive tunnels, preparing for the threatened offensive. Turkish tanks and armored vehicles are deployed on the border, with thousands of allied Arab Syrian fighters mobilized to join in the attack.

The threat from Turkey could drive the Kurds into the arms of Syrian President Bashar Assad, and by extension Iran and Russia.

"This is expected," Ebrahim Ebrahim, a Syrian Kurd based in Europe, said of the pullout. "But it is not just treason to the Kurds or the people of Syria but to democracy, to morals, if this is true. Yes, true, we fought for ourselves, but we also fought for democracies all over the world," he added.

Russian President Vladimir Putin welcomed the U.S. decision to withdraw its forces from Syria, saying he agreed with Trump that the defeat of the Islamic State group removes the need for the U.S. military presence. Russia has long held that the U.S. presence in Syria is illegitimate because it hasn't been vetted by the U.N. Security Council or approved by the Syrian government.

Russia is a key ally of Assad, and its military intervention, beginning in 2015, turned the tide of the war in his favor.

A Syrian member of parliament, Peter Marjana, said Thursday that a U.S. pullout would be a "recognition that Syria has won."

Trump's contention that IS has been defeated contradicted his own experts' assessments and shocked his party's lawmakers, who called his decision rash and dangerous.

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Earlier this month, Kurdish fighters entered Hajin, the last IS enclave in Syria, but battles continues. Government forces and allied Iranian militiamen are present on the other side of the Euphrates River.

The U.S. began airstrikes against IS in Syria in 2014 and later sent in ground troops to aid Kurdish forces. Trump abruptly declared their mission accomplished in a tweet Wednesday.

Fed's Powell embraces uncertainty and risks that go with it

By JOSH BOAK, AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Jerome Powell sounded a note of humility Wednesday. The question for the Federal Reserve chairman is whether humility plays well with the financial markets.

Speaking at a news conference after the Fed raised its key interest rate for the fourth time this year, Powell acknowledged the challenge for him and his colleagues: As the Fed edges closer to ending its rate hikes altogether, its decision-making has become trickier. No longer will the Fed be able to signal weeks in advance the near-certainty of a shift in rates.

Rather, the central bank will need to base its decisions on the most up-to-date economic figures on jobs, inflation and economic growth. There will be more uncertainty. And markets hate uncertainty.

"I think from this point forward, we're going to be letting the data speak to us," Powell told reporters. "So there's a fairly high degree of uncertainty about both the path and the ultimate destination of any further increases."

On Wednesday, Fed officials issued an updated set of forecasts that showed that they expect two rate increases in 2019. But Powell cautioned that those predictions were far from ironclad. He reminded his audience that the collective forecast reflects a compilation of individual officials' expectations and "certainly does not represent a committee plan."

His words, delivered in the chairman's characteristic calm baritone, were meant to be reassuring. But the stock market instantly delivered a sour verdict. Minutes into Powell's news conference, stock prices extended a mild fall into a plunge. By the close of trading, the Dow Jones Industrial Average had lost 352 points — 1.5 percent.

In recent years, investors had grown used to Fed officials telegraphing any future rate changes well in advance. Surprises were rare. Yet that policy is less viable for Powell than it was for his predecessor, Janet Yellen, who presided over a series of rate increases from a record low in 2015.

Because she was managing a series of steady increases from near zero, Yellen could signal forthcoming rate hikes in advance. She was also able to begin overseeing a gradual shrinkage of the Fed's portfolio of mortgage and Treasury bonds, which had ballooned as high as \$4.5 trillion in the aftermath of the financial crisis. Powell said he would continue to reduce the balance sheet. But he stressed that rates would be the main instrument of Fed policy.

"He's trying to signal that the finish line is within sight, but we're not quite there yet," said Carl Tannenbaum, chief economist at Northern Trust, a financial services company.

The difficulty for Powell is that he can't speak too confidently about the trajectory of rates, especially because he has said the Fed is nearly at its "neutral" rate. That's the point at which its key rate is thought to neither stimulate nor hinder growth. But exactly where that point is depends on what the latest economic data may show.

And Powell is acknowledging that forecasting rate hikes has become tougher in this environment.

"He's being intellectually honest," said Megan Greene, global chief economist at Manulife Asset Management.

Greene suggested that for Powell, the stock market might have been impossible to appease Wednesday.

Had the Fed announced a pause in rate hikes, it might have panicked investors about a sinking economy. Yet if the Fed had stressed its commitment to further hikes, it might have sparked fears that its intent to lift borrowing rates close to historic averages could shove the economy into a recession.

"His challenge is to communicate his way through this shift from forward guidance to data dependence," Greene said.

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For Powell, the economic outlook has become hazier as, in his words, "cross-currents" have emerged. A global slowdown is already weighing on growth. Stock markets have sold off sharply since September as the stakes of the trade war between the United States and China have intensified. Many economists are predicting that the United States could sink into a recession by 2020.

Perhaps most important, Powell must find ways to preserve his political independence as he endures a barrage of criticism over rate hikes from President Donald Trump. Trump, who chose Powell to lead the Fed, is expressing concern that the Fed's rate increases could derail the economy.

All these factors could influence the performance of the economy and how many more rate hikes the Fed will impose. To that end, Powell wants to downplay forecasts about Fed policy. Instead, he has decided, beginning in 2019, to hold news conferences after each of the Fed's eight meetings each year, rather than only quarterly.

The additional news conferences raise the likelihood that every Fed meeting could be the occasion for adjusting Fed policy in ways that might upset the markets. On the other hand, managed well, the news conferences could provide a valuable tool for Powell to shape how investors interpret the Fed's policies.

"If they do it right, it could actually help the market," said David Kelly, chief global strategist for JPMorgan Funds. "Powell has a chance to modulate his comments to basically try to correct any market misperception about what the Fed was trying to say."

AP Business Writer Marley Jay contributed to this report from New York.

10 Things to Know for Today

By The Associated Press

Your daily look at late-breaking news, upcoming events and the stories that will be talked about today:

1. COULD AFGHANISTAN BE NEXT AFTER SYRIA PULLOUT?

The abruptness with which President Trump turned the page on Syria raises questions about whether combat partners like Iraq and Afghanistan should feel confident that he will not pull the plug on them, too.

2. WHY TRUMP IS ON VERGE OF GIVING UP BEST CHANCE FOR WALL FUNDING

President Donald Trump appears likely to give up his last, best chance to secure money from Congress for the "beautiful" wall he's long promised to construct, as he backs away from his threat to partially shut down the government on Friday.

3. NO NUKES FOR PYONGYANG IN DOUBT

North Korea bluntly states it won't unilaterally give up its nuclear weapons unless the United States removes its nuclear threat first.

4. THE MISSING: DEADLIEST LOSS OF MIGRANTS AT SEA

Investigation to name migrants killed in 2015 shipwreck yields clues to an even greater tragedy, the AP finds.

5. IRAN'S PERSIAN RUG-MAKERS SUFFER AS US UNRAVELS NUCLEAR DEAL

As the Trump administration works to unravel Iran's 2015 nuclear deal with world powers, the producers of the country's famed Persian carpets fear they will lose vital markets.

6. HOW MCCONNELL WAS SOLD ON SENTENCING REFORM

Advocates who embarked on the campaign to sway Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell recognized his support as crucial to unlocking a historic overhaul of federal sentencing laws.

7. COURT DENIES EXTENDED DETENTION OF FORMER NISSAN CHAIRMAN

A Japanese court denied prosecutors' request to extend the detention of former Nissan chairman Carlos Ghosn, who has been charged with underreporting his pay.

8. JUDGE TO RULE ON FATE OF WEINSTEIN'S CRIMINAL CASE

Harvey Weinstein is due in court in New York as a judge decides on the future of his sexual assault case, which has been clouded by allegations police acted improperly in the investigation.

9. WHAT MAKES FOR A HAPPY CHICKEN

A researcher says the animal welfare world has moved beyond looking at how to minimize suffering to exploring whether animals can also enjoy their lives.

10. MLB, UNION AND CUBA REACH DEAL FOR PLAYERS TO SIGN

Major League Baseball, its players' association and the Cuban Baseball Federation reached an agreement allowing players from the island nation to sign big league contracts without defecting.

Investigation into worst migrant shipwreck yields more dead

By LORI HINNANT, TRISHA THOMAS and KRISTA LARSON, Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Before their lives ended in an underwater deathtrap, before they lined up 100 to a row on a Libyan beach to board a boat with no anchor, the young men from the parched villages of the Sahel had names.

Two forensic investigators, one crisscrossing Africa and another in a university laboratory in Italy, are on a quest against the odds to keep Italy's promise to find those names. They are tracing the identities of the migrants killed when an overloaded fishing boat went down off the coast of Libya on April 18, 2015, in the Mediterranean's deadliest shipwreck in living memory.

The pledge was made before Europe turned against migrants, and it just got even harder to keep. Nearing their very first formal identification, one of the investigators made a devastating discovery this month: The vessel carried not 800 people, as initially believed, but nearly 1,100.

Suddenly, there are hundreds more passengers to identify, adding to more than three years of painstaking work that had already pushed the boundaries of forensic science and tested the limits of both the Peruvian investigator with expertise in human rights violations and the Italian pathologist volunteering on the project.

The story of the fishing boat known as the peschereccio and its passengers reflects how migrants can simply vanish worldwide, sometimes without a trace. At a time when global migration is at an all-time high, The Associated Press has found in an exclusive tally that at least 62,284 migrants have died or disappeared worldwide since 2014. That's more than double the only official attempt at a toll, by the U.N.'s International Organization for Migration .

But it is also a story of how difficult it is to document these dead and missing, especially at a time when there is no longer a political will to support survivors, let alone figure out how many migrants died and who they were. Back in 2015, then-Prime Minister Matteo Renzi committed Italy to giving names back to those who perished in the April 18 shipwreck. There was a "short period of sunlight," when Italian agencies worked together to recover the bodies and start the process of identifying them, according to Cristina Cattaneo, the Italian forensic investigator.

"It was a magical moment," she said.

Governments have since slashed funding; rescue ships have drastically cut back operations in the Mediterranean under pressure. Many Italians question the need to identify the bodies when they already have "a tomb at the bottom of the sea," said Roberto Di Bartolo, the engineer who led firefighters in the recovery operation.

"But if this boat had not been full of people from Africa and instead they came from the United States, Australia or Japan," he said, "we would have done everything to get the bodies out and find their identity, to give names to those people, because they were people."

The migrants on the peschereccio started their journeys in some 20 countries, from Bangladesh to the western tip of Mauritania, according to information from the two investigators, published accounts of survivors, Italian government documents, and families who fear their loved ones were among the passengers. Many came from Africa's Sahel region, where Senegal, Mali and Mauritania meet, walking northward or hitching rides in trucks.

Cheikh Fofana's son called around that time to say he was leaving soon for Europe. Fofana warned him to wait for a big boat that might withstand the force of the sea. Surviving a vast ocean is nothing like

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escaping a tree-lined river, he said.

"I told him not to take a makeshift boat, it's very dangerous, it's risky because the sea has no branches," Fofana said.

His son, Tidiane responded he had waited too long to cross already, but promised, "I'll try to take the big boat."

That was the last time they spoke. He vanished along with two other young men from the town.

It is not known if they were among the 12 rows of men, 100 to a row, who lined up on the beach the day before the doomed peschereccio left from Libya. At the last minute, a truck arrived filled with around 200 men from East Africa. They had paid a premium and had priority boarding.

Not everyone on the beach would fit on the peschereccio, although the smugglers managed to slip a few extra on board.

The overcrowded boat made it 77 nautical miles off the coast of Libya, when it started to founder. It collided with a freighter that was trying to come to its rescue and sank, taking nearly all its human cargo into the depths.

Twenty-four bodies were fished out of the water and dropped off in nearby Malta. But Malta wouldn't accept the 28 survivors, who were then taken by the Italian coast guard to the Sicilian port city of Catania. The boat pulled up to the dock in the middle of the night, where a throng of volunteers tossed flowers at it and handed the survivors cellophane-wrapped care packages.

Over the next few days, the handful of survivors called home and word of the disaster spread like dust through the Sahel.

Around this time, Fofana called his son's phone again. A stranger answered and told him Tidiane had left for Italy.

The family visited several spiritual leaders, known as marabouts, hoping to learn Tidiane's fate. One said only that the son was in a "state of obscurity."

"I know that if he is dead, there's nothing more I can do, by the will of God. But let me know, is he alive? Is he dead?" Fofana said, his lined face twisting in anguish. "This is the doubt that troubles me."

It took a year to raise the hull from the sea floor and drag it to Italy, at a cost of 9.5 million euros.

Even before they rigged the pulley to the fragile frame of the boat, divers working 370 meters (1,214 feet) underwater placed a wreath of flowers on the waterlogged deck. The resurfacing operation took 20 hours — men leading it from the control room applauded when it budged from the seafloor. The navy's video aired on national television.

The fishing boat dangled from an enormous sling as the water drained away, reeking of death in dry dock at Melilli naval port in Sicily — the Italian island the migrants had hoped to reach when they set out.

That's when Italy's top pathologist, Cattaneo, arrived. So terrified of flying that she chose a 13-hour train and ferry trip to Sicily over a 90-minute flight, she was fearless when faced directly with death. As the firefighters donned hazmat suits against possible biological hazard, Cattaneo wore a T-shirt and jeans, her blond head bobbing amid the wreckage and bodies, a pair of latex gloves her only protection. Her confidence calmed them.

"I found before me a carpet of human silhouettes that stretched out across the area of the hold ... almost all face down, some in a fetal position, many swollen with putrefaction, made human by their hair, gloves, sweaters and the shoes they had on," Cattaneo wrote in her book published earlier this month, "Shipwrecked and Nameless."

The bodies were crammed five to a square meter (yard) — "like a slave ship," said Di Bartolo, the firefighter engineer.

"Out of respect, no firefighter ever stepped on a body," Di Bartolo said. "We had to lie across them to pull them up, but we never walked on them."

At Cattaneo's tent-lab, 50 pathologists and forensic investigators from 12 Italian universities worked in rotations, stretching the bounds of science to extract and sequence DNA from bodies or fragments that had been submerged in seawater for a year.

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With gloved hands, pathologists sealed plastic baggies of belongings, matching numbers with body bags as best they could. Other workers sealed metal coffins with a blowtorch.

As Cattaneo counted bodies — 500 of them by the September 2016 — legal proceedings moved forward in the case.

On Dec. 13, the Tunisian captain of the vessel was convicted of manslaughter and trafficking and sentenced to 18 years in prison. His Syrian mate got a 5-year term. The peschereccio lacked an anchor, the “captain” had no idea what he was doing, and the vessel was too rickety to withstand the waves or the hundreds of men on board.

UN and EU investigations later revealed that the head of the operation was a Libyan trafficker nicknamed “The Doctor,” believed to have sent 45,000 migrants to Europe in 2015 alone, and infamous for his brutality and the flimsiness of his boats. He’s never been apprehended.

Also in December, Renzi — the prime minister who had kept his vow to retrieve the boat with remains — lost the confidence of Italian voters and resigned as Italy’s leader. His departure contributed to the ascent of the fiercely anti-migrant Matteo Salvini.

As 2016 closed, Mediterranean migrant deaths peaked at more than 5,100, according to the IOM tally.

In the end, Italy counted 547 victims of the shipwreck plus 325 skulls that Cattaneo keeps at her lab for study. In her book, she detailed for the first time her suspicion that more than 1,000 people had died on the ship, relying upon accounts from survivors and what she saw in the hull.

The final body belonged to a Gambian, PM390345. In his wallet he had a passport, a library card, a student card and a blood donor certificate. In the pockets of his brown jacket he had some fig seeds.

It was time to find the families. For that, Italy turned to Jose Pablo Baraybar, the Peruvian forensic anthropologist from the International Committee of the Red Cross.

An intense man with enormous eyes magnified by button-lensed glasses, Baraybar investigated human rights abuses in his home country as well as Haiti, Rwanda and the Balkans. He started with the names of 27 young men from Mauritania whose families had reported them missing around April 2015 to the Red Cross.

That is how he found himself in May this year in the village of Melga along the desiccated bed of the Senegal River, armed with swabs for DNA samples and a whiteboard marker. Seated on the ground in the heat of the day, meeting with families who wanted to learn the fate of their sons, Baraybar had no easy answers.

“You cannot just tell them a story and you cannot misrepresent who you are. You’re not there to bring them a body bag or give them money,” said Baraybar.

Men and women allowed Red Cross staff to gently swab the inside of their cheeks, and entrusted Baraybar with still more names as they sipped water beneath huts with no walls and just fabric for a roof.

The 27 names led to 40 more in Mauritania to try to match against the DNA samples sequenced by Cattaneo in Italy.

With the information he’d gathered, Baraybar was able to chart connections among the young men who headed north for a better life. He uncovered the names of relatives, friends, acquaintances and even traffickers from the Sahel as he sought an algorithm to predict where victims might have lived — and who might have been on the boat.

That led him to his most recent trip to Senegal, where he confirmed crucial details about how the boat was loaded. Three of the rows of 100 migrants each waiting on the beach didn’t make it on the boat, because a truck arrived carrying around 200 migrants from East Africa who had paid a premium to board first.

And so Baraybar knows that somewhere in East Africa the families of dozens of men who disappeared in 2015 must be wondering about their fate.

“Families do matter,” he said. “And not knowing kills.”

Mariama Konte knows too well the price families pay when loved ones disappear in migration. Her father-in-law died of grief after her husband vanished around the same time as six other young men from

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Dougue. They last heard from them around April 2015, and the families fear the young men headed for Italy were on the peschereccio.

In Dougue, on dirt roads so empty that donkeys can rest in the street at midday without fear of a car, it's easy to spot the families whose sons work in Europe. They're the ones with the concrete houses, the metal rooftops and prominent satellite dishes. They have the largest herds of cattle and motorcycles, and their children are in school.

Konte, who married Abdrahamane when she was 12 and he was 21, is living the consequences of the family's decision in November to mourn him after nearly four years of waiting. Friends and neighbors told them they would feel better if they went ahead with the ceremony, as five other families of the missing already had.

So a few weeks ago, the family sacrificed a sheep, and she put on a lemon-yellow veil that marks her as a widow. She will wear the same clothes for four months and 10 days, washing only on Fridays. She will stay inside the family's compound and eat her meals alone. Then, by tradition, she will almost certainly marry one of her husband's brothers.

Even now, she cannot quite accept that her husband is dead.

"Each night I pray for him. I pray to God that he will find my husband," she said. "To find another husband is not hard but to find one like him is difficult."

The peschereccio still sits with holes in its sides where the bodies were pulled out. Italy's government refused to pay for Cattaneo's plan to move it to Milan.

In 2018, the number of migrants arriving illegally in Europe is set to reach its lowest level in five years; the number of dead is well below the levels seen when IOM started counting. Salvini, who is now Italy's interior minister and oversees the missing person's office, was uninterested in whether Renzi's promise had been kept.

He credits the new government's hardline policies against rescue for deterring deaths this year.

"You do not need a scientist to figure it out, that the fewer people depart, the fewer people die," he told The Associated Press with a shrug.

Baraybar and Cattaneo say they are close to their first identification — a single name among nearly 1,100 dead in a single shipwreck — in a year that saw at least 211 boats sink into the Mediterranean. He describes it as nearly a "mission impossible." And then he presses onward, searching for families who have more questions than answers.

His eyes widening almost past the edges of the round frames, he asks: "What kind of thing can you give back to these people that have lost everything?"

Only the names of the missing.

Lori Hinnant reported from Paris, Trisha Thomas from Rome; and Krista Larson from Goudiry and Dougue, Senegal.

Putin issues chilling warning on rising nuclear war threat

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV, Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russian President Vladimir Putin issued a chilling warning Thursday about the rising threat of a nuclear war, saying "it could lead to the destruction of civilization as a whole and maybe even our planet."

Speaking at his annual news conference, Putin pointed at the U.S. intention to withdraw from the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces, or INF, Treaty. He said that if the U.S. puts intermediate-range missiles in Europe, Russia will be forced to take countermeasures.

"We are witnessing the breakup of the arms control system," Putin said, noting the U.S. plan to opt out of the INF Treaty and its reluctance to negotiate the extension of the New START agreement.

He also noted that Western analysts are talking about the possibility of using low-yield nuclear weapons.

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"There is a trend of lowering the threshold" of using nuclear weapons, Putin said. "Lowering the threshold could lead to a global nuclear catastrophe."

"We will have to ensure our security," he said. "And they shouldn't squeak later about us gaining unilateral advantages. We aren't seeking advantages, we are trying to preserve the balance and ensure our security."

Putin also emphasized that the U.S. is pondering the use of ballistic missiles with conventional warheads, saying that the launch of such a missile could be mistaken for the launch of a nuclear-tipped one and trigger a global catastrophe.

"If that happens, it could lead to the destruction of the entire civilization and may be even our planet," he said.

Putin also noted that the U.S. appears to show little interest in extending the New START nuclear arms reduction treaty, which expires in 2021.

"You aren't interested, you don't need it? OK, we know how to ensure our security," he said.

On the economy, Putin hailed another year of Russian growth after a previous period of stagnation.

Russia's gross domestic product is set to grow by 1.8 percent this year, while industrial output has grown faster at 3 percent, he said.

The Russian president noted that the nation's hard currency reserves have increased from \$432 billion at the start of the year to \$464 billion now.

The positive statistics follow a difficult period in recent years when Russia's economy has suffered a combined blow of low oil prices and Western sanctions.

Russia's economy registered 1.5-percent growth last year following the two-year stagnation.

Putin pledged that the government will create incentives to speed up growth.

Hunt for names in deadly migrant shipwreck yields more dead

By LORI HINNANT, TRISHA THOMAS and KRISTA LARSON, Associated Press

ROME (AP) — The quest to trace the identities of all the victims of the Mediterranean's deadliest migrant shipwreck has instead revealed that the sinking was far deadlier than anyone knew.

One of the two investigators on the project, tracing families and survivors in Africa, has confirmed that the boat that sank on April 18, 2015 carried not 800 migrants as previously believed, but as many as 1,100.

That up to 300 people could vanish reflects the hidden toll of migration. At a time when global migration is at a record high, The Associated Press has found in an exclusive tally that at least 62,284 migrants have died or disappeared worldwide since 2014. That's more than double the only official attempt at a toll, by the U.N.'s International Organization for Migration .

The discovery also makes it even harder for the investigators to keep Italy's promise to name all the dead, especially at a time when Europe has turned against migrants.

After the boat sank, then-Prime Minister Matteo Renzi committed Italy to giving the migrants from the April 2015 shipwreck their identities back. It was a "short period of sunlight," said Cristina Cattaneo, Italy's top forensic investigator.

The political climate has since shifted in Europe. In Italy, as elsewhere, there is no longer a will to support survivors, let alone migrants who have died.

Cattaneo works on the case without pay at her university lab in Milan. Her counterpart, Jose Pablo Baybar from the International Committee of the Red Cross, gathers DNA from possible relatives in Africa. Together, they are piecing together exactly who died on what many Italians now call simply the peschereccio, the fishing boat.

The migrants on the peschereccio started their journeys in some 20 countries, from Bangladesh to the western tip of Mauritania, according to information from the two investigators, published accounts of survivors, Italian government documents, and families who fear their loved ones were among the lost passengers.

One father, Cheikh Fofana, said his son called to say he was leaving soon for Europe. That was the last he heard from Tidiane.

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On the day before the peschereccio left from Libya, 12 rows of men, 100 to a row, lined up on the beach. At the last minute, a truck arrived filled with around 200 men from East Africa.

Not everyone on the beach would fit on the peschereccio, although the smugglers managed to slip a few extra on board.

The overcrowded boat made it 77 nautical miles off the coast of Libya, when it started to founder.

Twenty-four bodies were fished out of the water and dropped off in nearby Malta. But Malta wouldn't accept the 28 survivors, who were then taken by the Italian coast guard to the Sicilian port city of Catania. The boat pulled up to the dock in the middle of the night, where a throng of volunteers tossed flowers and handed the survivors cellophane-wrapped care packages.

Around this time, Fofana called his son's phone again. A stranger answered and told him Tidiane had left for Italy.

"I know that if he is dead, there's nothing more I can do, by the grace of God. But let me know, is he alive? Is he dead?" Fofana said, his lined face twisting in anguish.

It took a year to raise the hull from the sea floor and drag it to Italy.

In her book released this month, Cattaneo described "a carpet of human silhouettes that stretched out across the area of the hold ... almost all face down, some in a fetal position, many swollen with putrefaction."

In the end, Italy's government counted 547 victims, plus 325 skulls that Cattaneo keeps in her lab for further study.

When it was time to find the families, Italy turned to Baraybar, the Peruvian forensic anthropologist.

An intense man with enormous eyes that peer from behind button-lensed glasses, Baraybar started with the names of 27 young men from Mauritania whose families had reported them missing around April 2015 to the Red Cross.

"You cannot just tell them a story and you cannot misrepresent who you are. You're not there to bring them a body bag or give them money," said Baraybar.

During a trip to Mauritania, the 27 names led to 40 more to try to match against the DNA samples sequenced by Cattaneo in Italy.

That led him to his most recent trip to Senegal, where he confirmed the higher count with people who had direct knowledge of how the boat was loaded.

After nearly four years, Cattaneo and Baraybar are nearing their first identification — with hundreds more to go.

Baraybar knows more about how the networks operate, more about the paths migrants take — and more about how to trace the dead. Like Cattaneo, he remains committed to pursuing the identities of the migrants who perished on the shipwrecked peschereccio.

"Families do matter," he said. "And not knowing kills."

Lori Hinnant reported from Paris, Trisha Thomas from Rome, and Krista Larson from Goudiry, Senegal.

USDA moves to tighten restrictions on food stamps

By JULIET LINDERMAN, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Trump administration is setting out to do what this year's farm bill didn't: tighten work requirements for millions of Americans who receive federal food assistance.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture on Thursday is proposing a rule that would restrict the ability of states to exempt work-eligible adults from having to obtain steady employment to receive food stamps.

The move comes just weeks after lawmakers passed a \$400 billion farm bill that reauthorized agriculture and conservation programs while leaving the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, which serves roughly 40 million Americans, virtually untouched.

Passage of the farm bill followed months of tense negotiations over House efforts to significantly tighten work requirements and the Senate's refusal to accept the provisions.

Currently, able-bodied adults ages 18-49 without children are required to work 20 hours a week to

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maintain their SNAP benefits. The House bill would have raised the age of recipients subject to work requirements from 49 to 59 and required parents with children older than 6 to work or participate in job training. The House measure also sought to limit circumstances under which families that qualify for other poverty programs can automatically be eligible for SNAP.

None of those measures made it into the final farm bill despite being endorsed by President Donald Trump. Now the administration is using regulatory rulemaking to try to scale back the SNAP program.

Work-eligible able-bodied adults without dependents, known as ABAWDs, can currently receive only three months of SNAP benefits in a three-year period if they don't meet the 20-hour work requirement. But states with an unemployment rate of 10 percent or higher or a demonstrable lack of sufficient jobs can waive those limitations.

States are also allowed to grant benefit extensions for 15 percent of their work-eligible adult population without a waiver. If a state doesn't use its 15 percent, it can bank the exemptions to distribute later, creating what Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue referred to as a "stockpile."

The USDA's proposed rule would strip states' ability to issue waivers unless a city or county has an unemployment rate of 7 percent or higher. The waivers would be good for one year and would require the governor to support the request. States would no longer be able to bank their 15 percent exemptions. The new rule also would forbid states from granting waivers for geographic areas larger than a specific jurisdiction.

Perdue said the proposed rule is a tradeoff for Trump's support of the farm bill. He is expected to sign it on Thursday.

"The president has directed me to propose regulatory reforms to ensure those who are able to work do so in exchange for their benefits," Perdue said during a media call Wednesday. "We would much rather have Congress enact these important reforms for the SNAP program. However, these regulatory changes by the USDA will save hardworking taxpayers \$15 billion over 10 years and give President Trump comfort enough to support a farm bill he might otherwise have opposed."

The USDA in February solicited public comment on ways to reform SNAP, and Perdue has repeatedly voiced support for scaling back the program.

The Trump administration's effort, while celebrated by some conservatives, has been met with criticism from advocates who say tightening restrictions will result in more vulnerable Americans, including children, going hungry.

A Brookings Institute study published this summer said more stringent work requirements are likely to hurt those who are already part of the workforce but whose employment is sporadic.

House Agriculture Chairman Michael Conaway, R-Texas, was the primary champion for tighter SNAP work requirements in the House farm bill. He praised the proposed rule for "creating a roadmap for states to more effectively engage ABAWDs in this booming economy."

The top Democrat on the Senate Agriculture Committee, Debbie Stabenow, of Michigan, who along with its Republican chairman, Sen. Pat Roberts, of Kansas, crafted the bipartisan Senate bill without any changes to SNAP, blasted the Trump administration for its attempt to restrict the program.

"This regulation blatantly ignores the bipartisan farm bill that the president is signing today and disregards over 20 years of history giving states flexibility to request waivers based on local job conditions," Stabenow said. "I expect the rule will face significant opposition and legal challenges."

N. Korea says it won't denuclearize unless US removes threat

By KIM TONG-HYUNG, Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — North Korea said Thursday it will never unilaterally give up its nuclear weapons unless the United States first removes what Pyongyang called a nuclear threat. The surprisingly blunt statement jars with Seoul's rosier presentation of the North Korean position and could rattle the fragile trilateral diplomacy to defuse a nuclear crisis that last year had many fearing war.

The latest from North Korea comes as the United States and North Korea struggle over the sequenc-

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ing of the denuclearization that Washington wants and the removal of international sanctions desired by Pyongyang. The statement carried by the North's official Korean Central News Agency also raises credibility problems for the liberal South Korean government, which has continuously claimed that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un is genuinely interested in negotiating away his nuclear weapons as Seoul tries to sustain a positive atmosphere for dialogue.

The North's comments may also be seen as proof of what outside skeptics have long said: that Kim will never voluntarily relinquish an arsenal he sees as a stronger guarantee of survival than whatever security assurances the United States might provide. The statement suggests North Korea will eventually demand the United States withdraw or significantly reduce the 28,500 American troops stationed in South Korea, a major sticking point in any disarmament deal.

Kim and President Donald Trump met June 12 in Singapore where they agreed on a vague goal for the "complete denuclearization" of the Korean Peninsula without describing when and how it would occur. The leaders are trying to arrange another meeting for early next year.

But North Korea for decades has been pushing a concept of denuclearization that bears no resemblance to the American definition, with Pyongyang vowing to pursue nuclear development until the United States removes its troops and the nuclear umbrella defending South Korea and Japan. In Thursday's statement, the North made clear it's sticking to its traditional stance on denuclearization. It accused Washington of twisting what had been agreed on in Singapore and driving post-summit talks into an impasse.

"The United States must now recognize the accurate meaning of the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, and especially, must study geography," the statement said.

"When we talk about the Korean Peninsula, it includes the territory of our republic and also the entire region of (South Korea) where the United States has placed its invasive force, including nuclear weapons. When we talk about the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, it means the removal of all sources of nuclear threat, not only from the South and North but also from areas neighboring the Korean Peninsula," the statement said.

The United States removed its tactical nuclear weapons from South Korea in the 1990s. Washington and Seoul did not immediately respond to the North Korean statement.

North Korea's reiteration of its long-standing position on denuclearization could prove to be a major setback for diplomacy, which was revived early this year following a series of provocative nuclear and missile tests that left Kim and Trump spending most of 2017 exchanging personal insults and war threats. The statement could jeopardize a second Trump-Kim summit as the United States may have difficulty negotiating further if the North ties the future of its nukes to the U.S. military presence in the South, analysts said.

South Korean President Moon Jae-in, who met Kim three times this year and lobbied hard for the Trump-Kim meeting, has said Kim wasn't demanding the withdrawal of U.S. troops from the Korean Peninsula as a precondition for abandoning his nuclear weapons. But Kim has never made such comments in public.

"The blunt statement could be an indicator that the North has no intentions to return to the negotiation table anytime soon," said Shin Beomchul, a senior analyst at Seoul's Asan Institute for Policy Studies. "It's clear that the North intends to keep its nukes and turn the diplomatic process into a bilateral arms reduction negotiation with the United States, rather than a process where it unilaterally surrenders its program."

Yang Moo-jin, a professor at Seoul's University of North Korean Studies, said it's unlikely that the North would push things too far and allow the momentum for dialogue to collapse. Pyongyang has been strengthening its demands for the removal of sanctions and its latest statement is another attempt to win concessions from Washington, Yang said.

"Pyongyang is sending a message to Washington that confrontation and dialogue cannot coexist," Yang said.

The nuclear negotiations between Washington and Pyongyang have stalled since the Trump-Kim meeting. The United States wants North Korea to provide a detailed account of nuclear and missile facilities that would be inspected and dismantled under a potential deal, while the North is insisting that sanctions be lifted first.

Since engaging in diplomacy, North Korea has unilaterally dismantled its nuclear testing ground and

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parts of a missile engine test facility and suspended nuclear and long-range missile tests. However, none of those moves were verified by outsiders, and most experts say they fall short as material steps toward denuclearization. In the third meeting between Kim and Moon in September, the North also said it would dismantle its main nuclear facility in Nyongbyon if the United States takes "corresponding measures," which the state media later specified as sanctions relief.

Kim declared his nuclear force was complete after the torrent of weapons tests in 2017, including the detonation of a purported thermonuclear weapon and three test-flights of intercontinental ballistic missiles potentially capable of reaching the U.S. mainland. Several reports from private analysts in recent weeks have accused North Korea of continuing nuclear and missile development, citing details from commercial satellite imagery.

"If we unilaterally give up our nuclear weapons without any security assurance despite being first on the U.S. list of targets for pre-emptive nuclear strikes, that wouldn't be denuclearization — it would rather be a creation of a defenseless state where the balance in nuclear strategic strength is destroyed and the crisis of a nuclear war is brought forth," the KCNA said.

"The corresponding measures we have asked the United States to take aren't difficult for the United States to commit to and carry out. We are just asking the United States to put an end to its hostile policies (on North Korea) and remove the unjust sanctions, things it can do even without a snap of a finger."

The North Korean statement came a day after Stephen Biegun, the Trump administration's special envoy on North Korea, told reporters in South Korea that Washington was reviewing easing travel restrictions on North Korea to facilitate humanitarian shipments to help resolve the impasse in nuclear negotiations.

During his four-day visit, Biegun plans to discuss with South Korean officials the allies' policies on North Korea, including the enforcement of sanctions. The meetings are likely to include conversations about a groundbreaking ceremony the Koreans plan to hold at the border village of Panmunjom next week for an aspirational project to reconnect their roads and railways.

The North has yet to respond to Biegun's comments.

Yemeni mom arrives in US to visit her dying son

By JULIE WATSON, Associated Press

A Yemeni mother who fought for the right to see her dying son arrived Wednesday night in California after the Trump administration gave her a long-sought waiver to its travel ban.

Shaima Swileh was mobbed by well-wishers at San Francisco International Airport.

"This is a difficult time for our family but we are blessed to be together," the boy's father, Ali Hassan, said at the airport. "I ask you to respect our privacy as we go to be with our son again."

Hassan and Swileh, wearing dark glasses and a white headscarf, were then driven away to see their 2-year-old son, Abdullah, at UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital in Oakland.

Citizens from Yemen and four other mostly Muslim countries, along with North Korea and Venezuela, are restricted from coming to the United States under the travel ban enacted under President Donald Trump.

The State Department granted Swileh a waiver Tuesday after lawyers with the Council on American-Islamic Relations sued this week, ending her family's yearlong battle.

"This will allow us to mourn with dignity," the boy's father had said in an earlier statement.

Hassan, who is a U.S. citizen and lives in Stockton, brought Abdullah to California in the fall to get treatment for a genetic brain disorder.

"My wife is calling me every day wanting to kiss and hold her son for the one last time," Hassan said, choking up as he made a public plea at a news conference Monday, a day before the government granted the visa.

The couple moved to Egypt after marrying in war-torn Yemen in 2016 and had been trying to get a visa for Swileh since 2017 so the family could move to California.

When the boy's health worsened, Hassan went ahead to California in October to get their son help. As the couple fought for a waiver, doctors put Abdullah on life support.

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"I am emailing them, crying, and telling them that my son is dying," Hassan said in an interview with The Sacramento Bee newspaper.

He started losing hope and was considering pulling his son off life support to end his suffering. But then a hospital social worker reached out to the Council on American-Islamic Relations, which sued Monday, said Basim Elkarra, executive director of the group in Sacramento.

Swileh lost months with her child over what amounted to unnecessary delays and red tape, Elkarra said. State Department spokesman Robert Palladino called it "a very sad case, and our thoughts go out to this family at this time, at this trying time."

He said he could not comment on the family's situation but that in general cases are handled individually, and U.S. officials try to facilitate legitimate travel to the United States while protecting national security.

"These are not easy questions," he said. "We've got a lot of foreign service officers deployed all over the world that are making these decisions on a daily basis, and they are trying very hard to do the right thing at all times."

Immigration attorneys estimate tens of thousands of people have been affected by what they call blanket denials of visa applications under Trump's travel ban, which the U.S. Supreme Court upheld in a 5-4 ruling in June.

The waiver provision allows a case-by-case exemption for people who can show entry to the U.S. is in the national interest, is needed to prevent undue hardship and would not pose a security risk.

But a lawsuit filed in San Francisco says the administration is not honoring the waiver provision. The 36 plaintiffs include people who have had waiver applications denied or stalled despite chronic medical conditions, prolonged family separations or significant business interests.

"We hope this case makes the administration realize the waiver process is not working," Elkarra said. "Thousands of families have been split apart, including families who have loved ones who are ill and are not able to see them in their final hours. I'm sure there are more cases like this."

In addition to the waiver, the government gave Swileh a visa that will allow her to remain in the United States with her husband and begin a path toward U.S. citizenship, Elkarra said.

Associated Press journalist Maria Danilova in Washington contributed to this report.

Trump on verge of giving up best chance to secure wall money

By ZEKE MILLER and JILL COLVIN, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Donald Trump's loyal supporters cried "Build the wall!" throughout his 2016 presidential campaign. Come 2020, they may well still be chanting for Trump to make good on his signature campaign promise as prospects dim for him to deliver on a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Trump appears likely to give up his last, best chance to secure money from Congress for the "beautiful" wall he's long promised to construct, as he backs away from his threat to partially shut down the government on Friday. Now, with the Senate having passed a temporary funding measure to keep the government open through Feb. 8, Trump's mission will go from difficult to near-impossible when Democrats take control of the House on Jan. 3.

The unfulfilled pledge also threatens to hang over his re-election campaign, potentially depressing his base and dealing his political rivals a powerful talking point.

"I thought if you're going to have a fight, now's the time to have it," said Sen. Lindsey Graham, a close ally of the president who warned that it's only going to get more difficult to get the money when Democrats take over.

"When you draw lines in the sand like this, it ends up haunting you in the future," the South Carolina Republican warned.

Rep. Mark Meadows, R-N.C., called on Trump to veto the temporary funding bill, warning that it would cause "major damage" to the president's re-election effort.

"The base will just go crazy," he said, referring to Trump's most loyal backers.

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Trump is hardly the first president to be confronted with the challenges of passing a legislative priority through Congress, but the lack of progress on an issue so closely identified with his bid for the White House may prove to be a costly failure. He had promised to begin working on an "impenetrable physical wall" along the southern border on his first day in office, but little headway has been made. A March funding bill included money for 33 miles (53 kilometers) of barrier construction in South Texas' Rio Grande Valley, but work there has yet to begin. Other work has merely replaced existing barriers that had been deemed "ineffective," not added miles.

The president's allies expressed anxiety Wednesday that Trump was, in the words of some, "caving" on the wall and warned of the potential backlash from his supporters and the impact it could have on his re-election effort. The failed promise, they argued, could weaken turnout and leave him more vulnerable to challengers.

Conservative commentator Ann Coulter published a column that called Trump "gutless" and said in a radio interview that she won't vote for Trump in 2020 if he doesn't deliver on the wall.

"Nor will, I think, most of his supporters. Why would you?" she asked, arguing that Trump's time in office will one day go down as "a joke presidency that scammed the American people."

Some within the administration cautioned that it was still possible Trump would change his mind and end up rejecting the stopgap funding bill, prompting a holiday shutdown that could also be politically damaging. Trump had said last week that he would be "proud" to have a shutdown to get Congress to approve a down payment on the wall.

Trump had originally demanded \$5 billion to begin building the wall this year, but the White House acknowledged this week that he is willing to settle for far less. The temporary measure offers just \$1.3 billion for border security fencing and other improvements. That money cannot be used for new wall construction.

The president had little choice. Even in the GOP-controlled House, Trump did not have the votes to get \$5 billion in wall money, and House Speaker Paul Ryan declined to bring it to the floor.

The White House is instead putting its faith in a potential work-around, with Trump telling allies he'll be able to make an end-run around lawmakers by using the military to fund and carry out construction, though such a move would face significant pushback from Congress as well as legal challenges.

"Because of the tremendous dangers at the Border, including large scale criminal and drug inflow, the United States Military will build the Wall!" he tweeted Wednesday.

White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said Tuesday that the president had also directed every one of his Cabinet secretaries "to look and see if they have money that can be used" for wall construction.

But Rep. Adam Smith, D-Wash., the incoming chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, told MSNBC that there has been strong opposition to using Defense Department dollars for border wall construction. And he said that Trump can't do so without lawmakers' signoff.

"Congress, both Republicans and Democrats, do not think the DoD money should go towards building a wall on the border," he said. "We have many other national security priorities that are vastly more important."

The president's conservative backers insist that Trump should not back down from his demand for \$5 billion from Congress.

"Trump should not sign this bill and leave for Mar-a-Lago, and tell them it's not gonna get signed and their precious government's not gonna get back up and running 'til there's \$5 billion," wrote radio host Rush Limbaugh.

On "Fox & Friends," Trump's favorite and most-tweeted-about morning show, conservative blogger Michelle Malkin described his latest move as a "cave" and a "blink."

Questioning White House counselor Kellyanne Conway, "Fox & Friends" host Brian Kilmeade said the president has "no leverage," while co-host Ainsley Earhardt asked why Trump was "softening" his position.

"The president is not softening his stance. He has a responsibility to keep the government moving forward and he has a responsibility to get border security," Conway responded.

Former Trump campaign adviser Barry Bennett said it was too soon to panic.

"He must have a trick up his sleeve because I can't imagine he would just walk away from it," Bennett

said.

Former Republican House Speaker Newt Gingrich said that while the base would be “unhappy” if border wall funding isn’t included in a final budget deal, it will make little difference come 2020.

“The other side doesn’t even need a border. Their party will be so pro-illegal immigration that the choice will be enormous,” he said.

Associated Press writers Catherine Lucey and Lisa Mascaro contributed to this report.

Follow Miller and Colvin on twitter at <https://twitter.com/ZekeJMiller> and <https://twitter.com/colvinj>

Japan court denies extended detention of Nissan’s Ghosn

By MARI YAMAGUCHI, Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — A Japanese court denied prosecutors’ request Thursday to extend the detention of former Nissan chairman Carlos Ghosn, who has been charged with underreporting his pay.

The Tokyo District Court said it rejected the request for another 10-day detention for Ghosn over an additional allegation dealing with financial reports in recent years.

The denial is extremely rare in a country where requests from investigative authorities for extended detention are almost automatically approved. If a bail request by his lawyer is accepted by the court, Ghosn may be released within days.

Prosecutors have appealed the decision, and could take further legal steps to allow them to investigate Ghosn and co-defendant and former Nissan executive Greg Kelly longer.

Shin Kukimoto, deputy chief prosecutor at Tokyo District Prosecutors’ Office, said that the court gave no reason for the decision.

“We requested for an extension because we need further investigation,” Kukimoto said. “I must say (the court decision) would affect us, but we’ll do the best we can.”

Ghosn was arrested Nov. 19 along with Kelly over allegations that they underreported Ghosn’s pay by about 5 billion yen (\$44 million) in 2011-2015. Both have since been charged with violation of Japan’s Financial Instruments and Exchange Act for the five-year period.

Tokyo prosecutors last week added a second allegation, that the two also underreported another 4 billion yen (\$36 million) in Ghosn’s pay for 2016-2018, for which their first 10-day detention was to expire later Thursday. Prosecutors allege Ghosn’s pay was underreported by a total of nearly 10 billion yen (\$80 million).

The maximum penalty for violating the financial law is up to 10 years in prison, a 10 million yen (\$89,000) fine, or both. The conviction rate in Japan is more than 99 percent for any crime.

The arrest of an industry icon has triggered international attention over his nearly monthlong custody at Tokyo Detention House. Prosecutors faced criticism for separating the same allegation into two periods as a tactic to keep Ghosn and Kelly in detention longer.

Prosecutors say Ghosn and Kelly are flight risks. No trial date has been set.

If they are bailed out, they are most likely to have to remain in Japan at a place decided by the court, often at home, Kukimoto said. Requests for their bail had not been submitted by their lawyers late Thursday.

The scandal also raised concerns over the Japanese automaker and the future of its alliance with Renault SA of France.

Ghosn, a Brazilian-born Frenchman of Lebanese ancestry, was sent in by Renault in 1999 to turn around Nissan, then on the verge of bankruptcy. For two decades, Ghosn led the Japanese automaker’s rise to the world’s second-largest.

Nissan has dismissed Ghosn as chairman and Kelly as a representative director. At a board meeting Monday, Nissan put off a decision on Ghosn’s replacement.

Nissan spokesman Nicholas Maxfield declined to comment on the court’s denial on Thursday, saying in a statement that the “decisions made by the Tokyo Public Prosecutors Office are based on their own investigations and on information provided by Nissan.”

Ghosn's downfall is seen by some as a maneuver by others at Nissan to gain power in the alliance.

This story has been corrected to say the amount of underreported pay in last three years amounted to \$36 million, not \$36 billion.

Follow Mari Yamaguchi on Twitter at <https://www.twitter.com/mariyamaguchi>

Trump pulling out of Syria. Might Afghanistan be next?

By **ROBERT BURNS, AP National Security Writer**

WASHINGTON (AP) — Against the advice of many in his own administration, President Donald Trump is pulling U.S. troops out of Syria. Could a withdrawal from Afghanistan be far behind?

Trump has said his instinct is to quit Afghanistan as a lost cause, but more recently he's suggested a willingness to stay in search of peace with the Taliban. However, the abruptness with which he turned the page on Syria raises questions about whether combat partners like Iraq and Afghanistan should feel confident that he will not pull the plug on them, too.

"If he's willing to walk away from Syria, I think we should be concerned about whether Afghanistan is next," Jennifer Cafarella, the director of intelligence planning at the Institute for the Study of War, said in an interview Wednesday.

The U.S. has been at war in Afghanistan for 17 years and still has about 15,000 troops there helping government troops combat the Taliban. The approximately 5,000 U.S. troops in Iraq are training and advising Iraqi security forces as they continue to fight Islamic State militants, a battle the U.S. entered in 2014 after IS swept into Iraq from Syria.

Before other officials confirmed the withdrawal decision, Trump tweeted, "We have defeated ISIS in Syria, my only reason for being there during the Trump Presidency." The aspect of this that he did not address is whether the extremists or others will fill the security vacuum created by the U.S. withdrawal to regroup and pose a new threat.

The administration said it intends to continue combatting Islamic State extremists globally and could return to Syria if necessary. Still, critics launched a barrage of questions about the implications of Trump's decision, including whether it opens the door for Turkish forces to attack the Syrian Kurds who had partnered with the U.S.

Kori Schake, deputy director-general of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, wrote on the Atlantic.com website Wednesday that the Syria decision ought to unsettle every ally that relies on U.S. security assurances.

"The governments of Iraq and Afghanistan ought to be very, very worried," she wrote. "For if Syria can be so lightly written off, the fight arbitrarily declared won, what is the argument for continuing to assist Iraq — where ISIS is even more defeated? And if Trump has so little interest in stabilizing security and assisting governance in Syria, how can Afghanistan have confidence that he won't make the same decision about them, when the fight there is costlier and progress less evident?"

These and other questions about the Trump decision and its broader implications were on the minds of many in Congress. Sen. Jack Reed, a Rhode Island Democrat, denounced what he called a betrayal of the Syrian Kurds.

"Now the President seems content to forsake their trust and abandon them to a potentially bloody conflict with Turkey," Reed said. "This decision also significantly increases the security risks to our key regional partners in Israel, Iraq and Jordan."

Trump has argued for a Syria withdrawal since he was a presidential candidate in 2016, and he has repeated his view several times since taking office. Still, the decision appeared to catch many in his administration by surprise; Pentagon officials offered no details on the timing or pace of the withdrawal, nor could they square it with numerous statements by Defense Secretary Jim Mattis about the importance of remaining in Syria to assure stability.

Sen. Lindsey Graham, a South Carolina Republican and typically a Trump supporter, said he was "blind-sided" by the decision and called it "a disaster in the making." He said, "The biggest winners in this are ISIS and Iran."

Republican Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida said the withdrawal would be a "grave error with broader implications" beyond the fight against IS. He called it "one more example of how the United States is not a reliable partner."

Just last week, the U.S. special envoy to the anti-ISIS coalition, Brett McGurk, said U.S. troops would remain in Syria even after the Islamic State militants were driven from their strongholds.

"I think it's fair to say Americans will remain on the ground after the physical defeat of the caliphate, until we have the pieces in place to ensure that that defeat is enduring," McGurk told reporters on Dec. 11. "Nobody is declaring a mission accomplished. Defeating a physical caliphate is one phase of a much longer-term campaign."

And two weeks ago, Gen. Joseph Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said the U.S. still has a long way to go in training local Syrian forces to prevent a resurgence of IS and stabilize the country. He said it will take 35,000 to 40,000 local troops in northeastern Syria to maintain security over the long term, but only about 20 percent of them have been trained.

Associated Press writer Lolita C. Baldor contributed to this report.

Iran's Persian rug-makers suffer as US unravels nuclear deal

By AMIR VAHDAT and MOHAMMAD NASIRI, The Associated Press

KASHAN, Iran (AP) — As the Trump administration works to unravel Iran's 2015 nuclear deal with word powers, the producers of the country's famed Persian carpets fear they will lose vital markets.

Before the U.S. withdrew from the deal and began restoring crippling sanctions earlier this year, the \$425 million a year industry preserved an ancient tradition while providing much-needed income to Iranians as well as Afghan refugees, who create much of the more luxurious hand-woven pieces. Iran produces some 400 tons of carpets a year and exports 80 percent of them.

Despite the decades of mutual hostility stemming from the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the United States is one of the biggest markets for Persian rugs, accounting for more than a quarter of all exports.

But that is set to change as the U.S. imposes what it says are the toughest sanctions in history, aimed at persuading Iran to dramatically change its policies in the region, including its support for militant groups and its involvement in Syria and other conflicts.

The impact of the renewed sanctions is being felt in the grand bazaar of Kashan, an ancient city in one of Iran's main carpet-weaving regions, known for its rich red, blue and yellow designs. On a recent day, many of the shops were closed and there were few shoppers.

The sanctions have fueled an economic crisis in Iran, where the currency has plummeted in recent months, wiping out people's life savings and sending prices soaring. The few tourists who visit Iran cannot use foreign credit cards because of U.S. sanctions on banking, making big purchases difficult.

"I would spend more if I could pay with my credit card," said Fabian Simon, a French tourist visiting the bazaar. "I took a certain amount of cash, and when it is finished, it is finished."

Mahmoud Morshedi, a carpet seller who has worked in the industry for more than four decades, said the production of hand-woven rugs was already suffering from the growing popularity of cheaper machine-made carpets. His company only produces around 20 hand-woven carpets a year, down from 100 in the 1990s, when they filled orders from local exporters, Tehran businessmen and wealthy buyers from Gulf countries. "They are not coming anymore," he said.

A small, 1.5 square meter (16 square foot) rug can take between 18 months and four years to make, and sells for up to \$6,000.

Iran is barred from exporting anything directly to the United States, and traders can only ship through

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third countries if they conceal the origin of the product.

Javad Esfahanian, whose family runs one of the oldest carpet-making businesses in the country, said the industry is only able to survive because of cheap labor from Afghan refugees — mainly women — who have the rare skills required for luxury weaving and who will work for as little as \$1.50 per day. He estimates that some 2 million people work in the industry and another 8 million rely on their income.

But the worsening economic conditions in Iran are already pushing Afghan refugees to leave, with some 350,000 returning home in just the first six months of this year, according to the U.N. agency for migration.

“If these Afghan weavers leave Iran, I am certain that production of hand-woven carpets will come to an end. I have no doubt,” Esfahanian said.

Iranian exports boomed after the landmark nuclear agreement went into effect in 2016, lifting international sanctions in return for Iran curbing its uranium enrichment. U.N. inspectors say Iran is complying with the agreement, and European countries are trying to salvage the deal, saying it provides the best means for preventing Tehran from developing nuclear weapons.

President Donald Trump was a harsh critic of the agreement, saying it was too generous and did nothing to restrain Iran’s support for militant groups like the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Palestinian Hamas or its meddling in Syria, Iraq and Yemen — none of which was part of the deal.

His administration has demanded Iran overhaul its regional policies in return for the lifting of sanctions, while Tehran appears to be waiting Trump out, hoping a future U.S. administration returns to the nuclear deal.

Mohammad Esfahanian, Javad’s 86-year-old cousin and the head of the Kashan Carpet Union, blamed his own country’s leaders for the crisis, saying “when you start cursing others in the world, they become your enemy.”

“Politics and economy are not separate from each other. If 10 stores sold the same good, which one would you buy it from? The one you have a better relationship with and the one that has a better behavior, of course.”

APNewsBreak: 4 faced scrutiny before arrest in Tibbetts case

By RYAN J. FOLEY, Associated Press

IOWA CITY, Iowa (AP) — Before investigators arrested a farmhand in the death of Iowa runner Mollie Tibbetts, they scrutinized a neighbor seen washing his car hours after she vanished, an acquaintance who erased his cellphone data, a Nebraska man who ditched his vehicle nearby and a farmer with a history of stalking women.

Newly unsealed search warrants reviewed by The Associated Press reveal that four men were the subject of police interest at times during the five-week search for the missing 20-year-old University of Iowa student. The documents provide new details about how Tibbetts’ July 18 disappearance in the town of Brooklyn, Iowa, stumped agents as the mystery became the focus of national media coverage and one of the largest investigations in state history.

The suspect ultimately charged in Tibbetts’ death, Cristhian Bahena-Rivera, did not come on their radar until shortly before he allegedly led them to her body in a cornfield in August.

Investigators say Rivera, 24, followed Tibbetts in a car and then on foot as she was out for an evening run, kidnapped her after a struggle and stabbed her to death. Rivera was identified as a suspect after officers found surveillance footage showing a Chevy Malibu that they later linked to him. Rivera, who is scheduled to stand trial, is a Mexican national who was allegedly in the U.S. illegally .

Before then, investigators had focused attention on four others in the suspected kidnapping based on circumstances and seemingly suspicious behavior. They faced police interviews, searches of their vehicles and property and scrutiny of their cellphone data before agents determined they had nothing to do with Tibbetts’ disappearance.

“It was not a fun thing to go through, that’s for sure,” said Tim Tometich, 42, who lives along the running route where Tibbetts was last seen. “But we all wanted her found and home safe and obviously

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understand they had a job to do and needed to track down every lead they had.”

Tometich drew attention after agents obtained surveillance footage from a Brooklyn car wash showing him washing a dark-colored SUV at 10:30 p.m. on July 18, hours after Tibbetts vanished. But he told investigators that he wasn't at the car wash until three days later and that his credit card information would show that. A state agent seeking a warrant to obtain Tometich's phone data alleged that claim was "untruthful" based on video and business records. Tometich declined comment on that.

All the men were later ruled out as suspects through further investigation, said Mitch Mortvedt, assistant director of the Division of Criminal Investigation.

"In any investigation we come across people who raise an eyebrow to us. They have absolutely nothing to do with the issue we're investigating, but their behavior draws your attention for a short amount of time," he said. "There was a handful of those scattered throughout the five weeks."

Rivera's attorney, Chad Frese, said he's aware of the individuals described in the warrants but that it's premature to comment on defense strategy.

Mortvedt said the farmer was of interest longer than others, in part because he gave multiple attention-grabbing media interviews in which he denied involvement but acknowledged his criminal history. He allowed agents to question him and search his home and property outside of Brooklyn, about 200 yards (182 meters) from where investigators determined that Tibbetts' cellphone dropped off the network.

The investigation was driven by technology from the beginning. Tibbetts' phone records indicated that her rate of movement on a rural road near Brooklyn sped rapidly, as if she went from running to traveling in a car. Investigators then obtained a warrant requiring Google to provide data showing which users could be tracked to that vicinity.

One of four such Google customers was a 17-year-old who was Facebook friends with Tibbetts. The teen's brother was on the same construction crew as Tibbetts' boyfriend, who was out of town when she vanished, so investigators assumed he may have known Tibbetts was home alone. The teen told agents he was at home July 18, but later said he may have been mowing a cemetery. He raised suspicion when he told agents that he had recently "wiped" his smartphone of all stored data and didn't have it on him.

The focus of intense interest early on was a 58-year-old Stanton, Nebraska man, who arrived at a car dealership 30 miles (48 kilometers) east of Brooklyn on July 20. The man told a salesman that he was driving to visit a foreign girlfriend while she was in Indiana but that his 1989 Chevy Grand Marquis was having transmission trouble, according to search warrant materials. He bought a used car for \$3,500 and left the Chevy there, taking its license plates and a small bag with him. He said he would be back for the Chevy — which a witness said resembled a suspicious vehicle she saw near Tibbetts' home on July 18 — but didn't leave contact information.

Agents searched the vehicle after seeing a reddish spot in the backseat. They found hairs, including dark ones that they thought could have belonged to Tibbetts, and sent them to the crime lab for examination. They obtained warrants for information from the man's two Facebook accounts, one of which liked the pages of dozens of scantily clad female athletes and models.

But Mortvedt said nothing in the car tied him to Tibbetts, and the man was ruled out as a suspect.

"Once we started to dive into a few of them, everybody as a team felt confident that we were safely eliminating them," he said.

Black leaders forged alliance with Trump on sentencing deal

By JESSE J. HOLLAND, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A rare bipartisan deal in Congress to overhaul federal sentencing laws passed after a few black ministers, leaders and lawmakers forged an alliance with President Donald Trump, who some have condemned as racist for the last two years.

The reforms could offer a path to freedom for hundreds of black and Latino inmates who were sent to prison by a justice system that critics say has long been stacked against minorities.

"It's like threading a needle politically," said Marc Morial, the National Urban League's president and CEO.

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"It's been very delicate to get us to the point where we are right now."

Bishop Harry Jackson, pastor of Hope Christian Church in Beltsville, Maryland, still gets questions from fellow African-Americans asking him why he and other conservative black ministers went to the White House over the summer to talk about the issue with Trump.

"People are still mad at us about that," Jackson said.

But the end result could be worth it to address what Jackson called "the defining civil rights issue of this era," even as detractors complain that the legislation did not go far enough and could invite new problems for minority communities.

The bill, which is expected to go to Trump soon for his signature, gives judges more discretion when sentencing some drug offenders and expands prisoner rehabilitation efforts. It also reduces the life sentence for some drug offenders with three convictions, or "three strikes," to 25 years.

Another provision would allow about 2,600 federal prisoners sentenced for crack cocaine offenses before August 2010 the opportunity to petition for a reduced penalty.

That will be a win for minorities who were caught up in a sentencing system that made crack cocaine a more serious offense than other types of cocaine, said New Jersey Sen. Cory Booker, a potential Democratic presidential candidate in 2020.

"When you correct an injustice in a biased system, it dramatically helps the marginalized people," Booker said. "That provision alone, 96 percent of the people who are helped by that, are black or Latino."

Among the advocates of the legislation was a diverse and unlikely group that included presidential adviser Jared Kushner, Kim Kardashian West, the National Urban League, black ministers and minority lawmakers and libertarian-leaning conservatives.

Some of the bill's advocates say it was a tough decision to work with a White House that is deeply unpopular with black people. More than 8 in 10 African-Americans said they thought Trump was racist in a February poll by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

But even the supporters say they know this legislation is only the beginning, as reflected by its name, the First Step Act.

Groups such as the NAACP cheered the passage of the bill but also harbored reservations.

The legislation "offers some important improvements to the current federal criminal justice system, but it falls short of providing the meaningful change that is required to make the system genuinely fair," said Hilary O. Shelton, director of the NAACP's Washington bureau.

The bill only affects the federal system, meaning anyone given harsh sentences at the state and local level will have no recourse. Those inmates make up the bulk of people behind bars across America.

Blacks constitute 38 percent — or about 68,000 — of the more than 180,000 inmates in the federal prison population, according to the Bureau of Prisons. Hispanics make up 32 percent — or about 58,000 — of federal prison inmates, with about 122,000 non-Hispanics in federal prison.

Some groups say the bill will open the door to increased surveillance of minority communities through electronic monitoring of released inmates. Others point out limitations in the bill on which federal prisoners will benefit from its changes.

The Movement for Black Lives, a coalition of more than 150 black-led organizations, called the legislation "custom-made for rich white men."

"All of the carve-outs make the vast majority of our people ineligible for the benefits of the bill," the group said.

Even with the limits, the bill's advocates are thrilled to have made progress on an issue where reform has remained elusive for more than a decade. Jackson said any president willing to talk about even minor changes should be worked with.

"I believe with all my heart, if Dr. Martin Luther King was alive, he would have been in that meeting," Jackson said. "And he would have been advocating for the voiceless instead of playing politics and personality games."

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APNewsBreak: US miscalculated benefits of oil train brakes

By MATTHEW BROWN, Associated Press

BILLINGS, Mont. (AP) — The Trump administration miscalculated potential damages from train derailments when it canceled an Obama-era rule requiring the installation of more advanced brakes by railroads hauling explosive fuels, The Associated Press has found.

A government analysis used by the administration to justify the cancellation omitted up to \$117 million in estimated future damages that could be avoided by using electronic brakes, and the error could stoke renewed criticism from supporters of the rule who say the analysis was biased.

Department of Transportation officials acknowledged the mistake after it was discovered by the AP during a review of federal documents, but said it doesn't change their decision not to install the brakes.

Safety advocates, transportation union leaders and Democratic lawmakers oppose the administration's decision to kill the brake rule, which was included in a package of rail safety measures enacted in 2015 under President Barack Obama following dozens of accidents by trains hauling oil and ethanol in the U.S. and Canada.

The deadliest happened in Canada in 2013, when an unattended train carrying crude oil rolled down an incline, came off the tracks in the town of Lac-Mégantic and exploded into a massive ball of fire, killing 47 people and obliterating much of the Quebec community's downtown. There have been other fiery crashes and fuel spills in Alabama, Oregon, Montana, Virginia, West Virginia, North Dakota and Illinois.

After the brake rule was enacted, lobbyists for the railroad and oil industries pushed to cancel it, citing the high cost of installing so-called electronic pneumatic brakes and questioning their effectiveness.

Unlike other systems where brakes are applied sequentially along the length of a train, electronic pneumatic brakes, or ECP, work on all cars simultaneously. That can reduce the distance and time a train needs to stop, and cause fewer cars to derail.

"These ECP brakes are very important for oil trains," said Steven Ditmeyer, a rail safety expert and former senior official at the Federal Railroad Administration. "It makes a great deal of sense: All the brakes get applied immediately, and there would be fewer cars in the pileup."

Under Obama, the Transportation Department determined the brakes would cost up to \$664 million over 20 years and save between \$470 million and \$1.1 billion from accidents that would be avoided.

The Trump administration reduced the range of benefits to between \$131 million and \$374 million. Transportation department economists said in their analysis that the change was prompted in part by a reduction in oil train traffic in recent years, which meant there would be fewer derailments.

But in making their calculations, they left out the most common type of derailments in which spilled and burning fuel causes property damage but no mass casualties, the AP found. Equipping fuel trains with electronic brakes would reduce damages from those derailments by an estimated \$48 million to \$117 million, according to Department of Transportation estimates that were left out of the administration's final tally.

Including the omitted benefits reduces the net cost of the requirement to as low as \$63 million under one scenario laid out by the agency.

Transportation spokesman Bobby Fraser said the omission was unintentional and would not have changed September's decision to cancel the electronic brake requirement. Under the administration's analysis, the cost of the brakes would have outweighed the benefits even when considering estimated damages from derailments that were left out of the original findings.

However, excluding those potential damages means the difference between costs and benefits would have been much narrower.

A 2015 act of Congress mandated that the Department of Transportation repeal the braking requirement if an analysis showed more costs than benefits. Fraser said a correction to the agency's findings will be

published to the federal register, but the repeal will stand.

"With the correction, in all scenarios costs still outweigh benefits," Fraser said. "Therefore, the outcome ... would not have changed."

The Association of American Railroads declined comment on the agency's cost benefit calculations. Spokeswoman Jessica Kahane said the move to rescind the Obama rule was in line with the requirements set forth by Congress.

John Risch, national legislative director for the International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers, said electronic brakes are overdue and would have prevented some accidents including the deaths at Lac-Megantic.

He added that the omission of some derailments from the government's findings further tilted a study that was already flawed.

"The study was corrupt to begin with," Risch said. "We are using a 120-year-old technology with mechanical brakes. They've come to the peak of what you can do with them."

Follow Matthew Brown at <https://twitter.com/matthewbrownap>

US adults aren't getting taller, but still putting on pounds

By MIKE STOBBE, AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — You don't need to hang the mistletoe higher but you might want to skip the holiday cookies.

A new report released Thursday shows U.S. adults aren't getting any taller but they are still getting fatter. The average U.S. adult is overweight and just a few pounds from obese, thanks to average weight increases in all groups — but particularly whites and Hispanics.

Overall, the average height for men actually fell very slightly over the past decade. There was no change for women.

One factor may be the shift in the country's population. There's a growing number of Mexican-Americans, and that group tends to be a little shorter, said one of the report's authors, Cynthia Ogden of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The findings come from a 2015-16 health survey that measures height and weight. More than 5,000 U.S. adults took part.

CDC records date back to the early 1960s, when the average man was a little over 5 feet, 8 inches tall and weighed 166 pounds. Now, men are almost 1 inch taller and more than 30 pounds heavier. But today's average height of 5 feet, 9 inches is about a tenth of an inch shorter than about a decade ago.

The average woman in the early 1960s was 5 feet, 3 inches and 140 pounds. Now, women are a half-inch taller and about 30 pounds heavier, on average. The average height is about the same as it was a decade earlier: 5 feet, 4 inches.

Other survey findings:

—In the last decade, the average weight of men rose about 2 pounds, to 198. For women, it rose 6 pounds, to nearly 171.

—Men have 40-inch waistlines, on average. Women's waistlines are a little under 39 inches.

—The average height of black men and white men has been holding about steady, at a little under 5 feet 10.

—Mexican-American and Asian-American men are roughly 3 inches shorter than whites and blacks, on average. There was a similar height gap in women.

In 2016, about 18 percent of the nation's population was Hispanic, up from about 13 percent in 2000, according to U.S. Census figures. Mexican-Americans account for nearly two-thirds of the Hispanic population.

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Bluegrass blitz: How McConnell was sold on sentencing reform

By MARY CLARE JALONICK, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — When Mitch McConnell returned to his home state of Kentucky, he couldn't escape the debate over criminal justice reform.

Ads in favor of the Senate bill were running on television. Religious leaders, business executives and local politicians were talking about it. Even McConnell's beloved University of Louisville proved no sanctuary: It held a forum in support of the legislation.

Much of the noise in Kentucky was no accident. It was encouraged and amplified by advocates who embarked on a single-minded campaign to sway the senate majority leader, recognizing his support as crucial to unlocking a historic overhaul of federal sentencing laws - a bill now on the precipice of becoming law.

"We'd get into meetings and no one was thinking about the leader, and to me, that's the goal line," said Holly Harris, the director of the advocacy group Justice Action Network and a former Kentucky Republican Party official. "So we started working on voices that would be most impactful to the leader and going to places where he would notice us."

Harris, who lives in Kentucky, enlisted the White House and other groups across the state to get McConnell's attention at home as President Donald Trump and other Republican supporters in Washington pushed him to bring the bill up. McConnell doesn't like to divide his caucus, and he had been hesitant to put the legislation on the floor as a handful of Republicans were saying the bill was too soft on some criminals.

"It was critical that he understand both the policy value of criminal justice reform and also the political," Harris said of McConnell, who is up for re-election in 2020.

Harris and others helped organize the forum at the University of Louisville, for example, with a roster of carefully selected speakers. The list included former Attorney General Michael Mukasey, former Utah Rep. Jason Chaffetz and Brett Tolman, a former U.S. attorney for Utah. It also included Sadiqa Reynolds, head of the Louisville Urban League, long an important constituency to McConnell.

The forum came the day before rapper Kanye West visited the White House to talk about the issue, an event that garnered considerably more headlines. But Harris was focused on McConnell.

"This is a serious man, and he wants voices that have gravity," Harris said.

The White House helped in subtle ways. Jared Kushner, President Donald Trump's son-in-law who was lobbying McConnell in Washington to bring up the bill, also helped promote the issue locally. At one point, the press-shy Kushner unexpectedly joined a call with local reporters about polling data that showed support for the bill in Kentucky, surprising even those who had organized it.

Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul also added pressure, doing appearances and meetings around the state. He did several of the events with his wife, Kelley, who visited rehabilitation centers and halfway houses that would be boosted by the bill.

Even with his fellow Kentuckians, the famously tight-lipped McConnell didn't hint at how he would move forward. While Democratic and Republican senators pressured him to bring up the legislation in Washington, he listened to friends in Kentucky who adopted a strategy of flooding him with information, but not pressuring too obviously or too hard.

Josh Crawford of the Pegasus Institute, a Kentucky think tank that has a strong relationship with McConnell, says that pressure from people or groups outside the state that demonized him for holding up the bill were not effective.

"Mean tweets were not going to get him to move," Crawford said. Instead, Crawford lobbied for the legislation by approaching it as a conversation with McConnell in which repeatedly detailed how similar reforms have worked on the state level.

"I do think localizing it was important to him," he said. "Reform efforts in Texas, or Georgia or South Carolina are good, but I think him seeing what has gone on here from a policy standpoint and politically helped."

The bill, which overwhelmingly passed the Senate on Tuesday, gives federal judges more discretion when

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sentencing some drug offenders and boosts prisoner rehabilitation efforts. It follows efforts in several states, including Kentucky, to overhaul parts of the system.

The legislation represents a huge shift from criminal policy when McConnell first came to the Senate in the 1980s. At that time, "tough on crime" was a popular Republican buzzword.

Sen. Mike Lee, R-Utah, a top advocate for the legislation who pushed McConnell to bring it up, says he has seen the tenor shift even since he came to the Senate in 2011. Republicans, including some major GOP donors, have increasingly embraced the changes as a way to save taxpayer money, better rehabilitate prisoners and make sentencing fairer.

"One of the most effective arguments we had in support of the legislation is that legislation like this has been enacted in a number of states," Lee said.

McConnell likely took note of the political effect in his state, too, as Republican State Sen. Julie Rague Adams, who represents Louisville, was re-elected this year after successfully pushing state legislation to help female prisoners. The issue showed up in campaign ads and she won her race as several other GOP lawmakers in her area were defeated.

Adams, who says she has tailgated with McConnell at University of Louisville games, spoke to the majority leader about the issue.

"I communicated how important it was in my race, and how it really connected with people in the urban areas," she said.

Despite all of the efforts, the bill appeared to have stalled in the Senate by late November, with only a few weeks left in the session. Harris scheduled a meeting with McConnell and brought a binder full of articles and other evidence that the issue was playing well in Kentucky.

"I prepped for that meeting with McConnell like I was studying for the bar exam," Harris said. "We just kept saying, this issue is very important in Kentucky."

Along with the efforts from Washington Republicans, including Trump, the Kentucky lobbying paid off. Not only did McConnell announce last week that he would bring up the bill, but it passed with 87 yes votes on Tuesday night — including the majority leader's.

It now heads to the House, where Speaker Paul Ryan has said it will get a vote.

McConnell was "the person who saved this bill," Harris said. "Ultimately the voices that are going to matter to him most are the ones back at home. That was our calculation"

Associated Press writer Jill Colvin contributed to this report.

Senate approves bill to keep government running into 2019

By **LISA MASCARO, MATTHEW DALY and CATHERINE LUCEY, Associated Press**

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate approved legislation Wednesday to temporarily fund the government, a key step toward averting a federal shutdown after President Donald Trump backed off his demand for money for a border wall with Mexico.

Senators passed the measure, which would keep government running to Feb. 8, by voice vote without a roll call. The House is also expected to move before Friday's deadline, when funding for a portion of the government expires. Without resolution, more than 800,000 federal workers would face furloughs or be forced to work without pay, disrupting government operations days before Christmas.

While the White House indicated Trump was open to reviewing whatever Congress could pass, the president did not immediately weigh in on the short-term plan.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., said the Senate will remain in session Thursday. "We have to see what the House does," he said.

Many of Trump's supporters were frustrated that he appeared to retreat on his shutdown threats after promising a fight over the wall, which had been central to his presidential campaign. Just last week Trump said he would be "proud" to shut down the government over his demand for \$5 billion for the wall. Some allies described the move as caving on his pledge, expressing concern that it could hurt Trump's 2020

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prospects.

Rep. Mark Meadows, R-N.C., a leader of the conservative House Freedom Caucus, said Trump's political base "will just go crazy" if he signs a bill without wall funding. He warned it will be tougher to win the money next year when Democrats control the House. He said supporters of the president "believe it's a promise that he's been telling them that he will keep."

On Twitter, Trump appeared to respond to criticism by insisting that "one way or the other, we will win on the Wall!"

Trump counselor Kellyanne Conway also faced tough questioning on "Fox & Friends," the morning show known to be one of Trump's favorites. Host Brian Kilmeade said Wednesday that Trump has "no leverage," while Ainsley Earhardt asked why Trump was "softening" his position.

"The president is not softening his stance," Conway said. "He has a responsibility to keep the government moving forward, and he has a responsibility to get border security."

McConnell, though, portrayed the short-term spending measure as a "simple" bill that would show that Republicans, who control Congress now, will finish the year by not prolonging a potential crisis.

"Republicans will continue to fill our duty to govern," he said.

Voting was delayed until late Wednesday as a bipartisan group of lawmakers, mostly from the West, pushed a package that would reauthorize a popular Land and Water Conservation Fund, which expired Sept. 30, and add other measures addressing public lands. Unable to reach agreement, they postponed action as talks continued.

At one point late in the late evening, senators broke out in a round of Christmas carols from a corner of the chamber. A few moments later, retiring Sen. Jeff Flake, R-Ariz., gavelled a procedural vote closed by suggesting "Rudolph" had voted present.

It was unclear how many House members would return to Washington for votes after Republicans lost the majority in the midterm election. Some 70 members missed Wednesday's session, almost as many Democrats as Republicans.

With many House Republicans sour on the spending package, passage could depend on Democrats.

Democratic House leader Nancy Pelosi, who is on track to become speaker when Democrats take control Jan. 3, signaled support for ensuring funding.

Should the legislation become law, the border money fight would drag into the next Congress, which could prove even more difficult for Trump.

Pelosi will probably be able to quickly win approval of a longer-term measure to keep government running in 2019.

"Democrats will be ready to fully, responsibly fund our government in January," Pelosi said in a statement.

As some Republicans grumbled that Trump caved, McConnell lashed out at Democrats for failing to give Trump any of the \$5 billion that he wanted for the wall. The bill keeps funding at current levels, \$1.3 billion, for border security and fencing, but not for the wall.

"This seems to be the reality of our political moment," McConnell said. "It seems like political spite for the president may be winning out over sensible policy."

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer of New York said Democrats oppose Trump's border demands because the wall is "inefficient" and because Trump, as a candidate, promised that Mexico would pay for it, which Mexico has refused to do.

"We want smart, effective border security," Schumer said. "That's not a wall."

But the White House showed its willingness to budge as it became apparent the president did not have support in Congress for paying for the wall.

White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders indicated earlier this week that Trump did not want to shut down the government. She said the administration was looking at ways to find the money elsewhere, though that was uncertain because it would also likely need congressional approval.

Congress did pass legislation to fund much of the government through the current budget year, until next Oct. 1.

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At issue is money for nine of 15 Cabinet-level departments and dozens of agencies, including the departments of Homeland Security, Transportation, Interior, Agriculture, State and Justice, as well as national parks and forests.

The stopgap measure would approve government funding at existing levels for those departments, without a boost for the border. It would include a temporary extension of a national flood insurance program, the Violence Against Women Act and other measures.

Several lawmakers have complained that the appropriations process continues to be tangled in partisan politics. Top appropriators had tried to improve the process this year by passing bipartisan bills that would have funded those agencies, as they hoped to stem the cycle of shutdown crises. They lamented having to abandon those efforts for the temporary measure.

Sen. Richard Shelby, R-Ala., the chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, said they “worked a long time” on the bills, but hope “evaporated” as the shutdown risk deepened.

Many agencies, including the Pentagon and the departments of Veterans Affairs and Health and Human Services, are covered for the year and would continue to operate as usual. The U.S. Postal Service, busy delivering packages for the holiday season, would not be affected by any government shutdown because it’s an independent agency.

Associated Press writer Laurie Kellman in Washington contributed to this report.

Travelers face chaos as drones shut London’s Gatwick airport

By GREGORY KATZ and JILL LAWLESS, Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Thousands of passengers were delayed, diverted or stuck on planes Thursday as the only runway at Britain’s Gatwick Airport remained closed into a second day after drones were spotted over the airfield.

The airport south of London — Britain’s second-busiest by passenger numbers — closed its runway Wednesday evening after two drones were spotted. It reopened briefly at about 3 a.m. Thursday, but shut 45 minutes later after further sightings.

The airport said all incoming and outgoing flights were suspended. Passengers were advised to check the status of their flights before heading to the airport, where many slept on floors or formed long lines at information desks.

Police said the drone flights were a “deliberate act to disrupt the airport,” but that there were “absolutely no indications to suggest this is terror-related.”

Chris Woodroofe, Gatwick’s chief operating officer, said that roughly 10,000 people had been affected by the shutdown by Thursday morning, including 2,000 whose planes were unable to take off from Gatwick, 2,000 stuck at their points of origin and 6,000 diverted to other airports in Britain, as well as Paris and Amsterdam.

Those numbers are expected to rise sharply. More than 100,000 passengers had been scheduled to pass through Gatwick on Thursday on 760 arriving and departing flights.

Woodroofe said at least one drone remained in the area Thursday morning.

“As I stand here, there is a drone on my airfield as we speak,” Woodroofe told Sky News.

A police helicopter was hovering near the airfield as officers from two nearby forces hunted the drone operators.

“The police advice is that it would be dangerous to seek to shoot the drone down because of what may happen to the stray bullets,” Woodroofe said.

Any problem at Gatwick causes a ripple effect throughout Britain and continental Europe, particularly during a holiday period when air traffic control systems are under strain.

Passengers complained on Twitter that their Gatwick-bound flights had landed at London Heathrow, Manchester, Birmingham and other cities.

Luke McComiskie, who landed in Manchester — more than 160 miles (260 kilometers) from London —

said the situation "was just chaos, and they had only two coaches (buses) and taxis charging people 600 pounds (\$760) to get to Gatwick."

Gatwick, about 30 miles (45 kilometers) south of London, sees more than 43 million passengers a year to short- and long-haul destinations and serves as a major hub for the budget carrier easyJet.

Gatwick normally operates throughout the night but the number of flights is restricted because of noise limitations. The airport website says it usually handles 18 to 20 flights overnight during the winter months.

Gatwick briefly closed its runway last year when a drone was spotted in the area.

Pilots have reported numerous near-misses with drones in recent years in Britain, and aviation authorities have warned there is a growing risk that a midair collision could cause a major disaster.

Strong sales of small consumer drones have led to repeated warnings about a possible threat to commercial aviation.

Flying a drone near an airport carries a maximum penalty of five years in prison.

Christopher Lister, whose flight from Kiev, Ukraine, to Gatwick was diverted to Birmingham in central England, said the scale of the disruption was "a little bit scary."

"We feel grateful it's not a worse story this morning about an aircraft (that has) come down," he told the BBC.

USDA moves to tighten restrictions on food stamps

By JULIET LINDERMAN, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Trump administration is setting out to do what this year's farm bill didn't: tighten work requirements for millions of Americans who receive federal food assistance.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture on Thursday is proposing a rule that would restrict the ability of states to exempt work-eligible adults from having to obtain steady employment to receive food stamps.

The move comes just weeks after lawmakers passed a \$400 billion farm bill that reauthorized agriculture and conservation programs while leaving the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, which serves roughly 40 million Americans, virtually untouched.

Passage of the farm bill followed months of tense negotiations over House efforts to significantly tighten work requirements and the Senate's refusal to accept the provisions.

Currently, able-bodied adults ages 18-49 without children are required to work 20 hours a week to maintain their SNAP benefits. The House bill would have raised the age of recipients subject to work requirements from 49 to 59 and required parents with children older than 6 to work or participate in job training. The House measure also sought to limit circumstances under which families that qualify for other poverty programs can automatically be eligible for SNAP.

None of those measures made it into the final farm bill despite being endorsed by President Donald Trump. Now the administration is using regulatory rulemaking to try to scale back the SNAP program.

Work-eligible able-bodied adults without dependents, known as ABAWDs, can currently receive only three months of SNAP benefits in a three-year period if they don't meet the 20-hour work requirement. But states with an unemployment rate of 10 percent or higher or a demonstrable lack of sufficient jobs can waive those limitations.

States are also allowed to grant benefit extensions for 15 percent of their work-eligible adult population without a waiver. If a state doesn't use its 15 percent, it can bank the exemptions to distribute later, creating what Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue referred to as a "stockpile."

The USDA's proposed rule would strip states' ability to issue waivers unless a city or county has an unemployment rate of 7 percent or higher. The waivers would be good for one year and would require the governor to support the request. States would no longer be able to bank their 15 percent exemptions. The new rule also would forbid states from granting waivers for geographic areas larger than a specific jurisdiction.

Perdue said the proposed rule is a tradeoff for Trump's support of the farm bill. He is expected to sign it on Thursday.

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"The president has directed me to propose regulatory reforms to ensure those who are able to work do so in exchange for their benefits," Perdue said during a media call Wednesday. "We would much rather have Congress enact these important reforms for the SNAP program. However, these regulatory changes by the USDA will save hardworking taxpayers \$15 billion over 10 years and give President Trump comfort enough to support a farm bill he might otherwise have opposed."

The USDA in February solicited public comment on ways to reform SNAP, and Perdue has repeatedly voiced support for scaling back the program.

The Trump administration's effort, while celebrated by some conservatives, has been met with criticism from advocates who say tightening restrictions will result in more vulnerable Americans, including children, going hungry.

A Brookings Institute study published this summer said more stringent work requirements are likely to hurt those who are already part of the workforce but whose employment is sporadic.

House Agriculture Chairman Michael Conaway, R-Texas, was the primary champion for tighter SNAP work requirements in the House farm bill. He praised the proposed rule for "creating a roadmap for states to more effectively engage ABAWDs in this booming economy."

The top Democrat on the Senate Agriculture Committee, Debbie Stabenow, of Michigan, who along with its Republican chairman, Sen. Pat Roberts, of Kansas, crafted the bipartisan Senate bill without any changes to SNAP, blasted the Trump administration for its attempt to restrict the program.

"This regulation blatantly ignores the bipartisan farm bill that the president is signing today and disregards over 20 years of history giving states flexibility to request waivers based on local job conditions," Stabenow said. "I expect the rule will face significant opposition and legal challenges."

Iran's Persian rug-makers suffer as US unravels nuclear deal

By AMIR VAHDAT and MOHAMMAD NASIRI, The Associated Press

KASHAN, Iran (AP) — As the Trump administration works to unravel Iran's 2015 nuclear deal with word powers, the producers of the country's famed Persian carpets fear they will lose vital markets.

Before the U.S. withdrew from the deal and began restoring crippling sanctions earlier this year, the \$425 million a year industry preserved an ancient tradition while providing much-needed income to Iranians as well as Afghan refugees, who create much of the more luxurious hand-woven pieces. Iran produces some 400 tons of carpets a year and exports 80 percent of them.

Despite the decades of mutual hostility stemming from the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the United States is one of the biggest markets for Persian rugs, accounting for more than a quarter of all exports.

But that is set to change as the U.S. imposes what it says are the toughest sanctions in history, aimed at persuading Iran to dramatically change its policies in the region, including its support for militant groups and its involvement in Syria and other conflicts.

The impact of the renewed sanctions is being felt in the grand bazaar of Kashan, an ancient city in one of Iran's main carpet-weaving regions, known for its rich red, blue and yellow designs. On a recent day, many of the shops were closed and there were few shoppers.

The sanctions have fueled an economic crisis in Iran, where the currency has plummeted in recent months, wiping out people's life savings and sending prices soaring. The few tourists who visit Iran cannot use foreign credit cards because of U.S. sanctions on banking, making big purchases difficult.

"I would spend more if I could pay with my credit card," said Fabian Simon, a French tourist visiting the bazaar. "I took a certain amount of cash, and when it is finished, it is finished."

Mahmoud Morshedi, a carpet seller who has worked in the industry for more than four decades, said the production of hand-woven rugs was already suffering from the growing popularity of cheaper machine-made carpets. His company only produces around 20 hand-woven carpets a year, down from 100 in the 1990s, when they filled orders from local exporters, Tehran businessmen and wealthy buyers from Gulf countries. "They are not coming anymore," he said.

A small, 1.5 square meter (16 square foot) rug can take between 18 months and four years to make,

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and sells for up to \$6,000.

Iran is barred from exporting anything directly to the United States, and traders can only ship through third countries if they conceal the origin of the product.

Javad Esfahanian, whose family runs one of the oldest carpet-making businesses in the country, said the industry is only able to survive because of cheap labor from Afghan refugees — mainly women — who have the rare skills required for luxury weaving and who will work for as little as \$1.50 per day. He estimates that some 2 million people work in the industry and another 8 million rely on their income.

But the worsening economic conditions in Iran are already pushing Afghan refugees to leave, with some 350,000 returning home in just the first six months of this year, according to the U.N. agency for migration.

“If these Afghan weavers leave Iran, I am certain that production of hand-woven carpets will come to an end. I have no doubt,” Esfahanian said.

Iranian exports boomed after the landmark nuclear agreement went into effect in 2016, lifting international sanctions in return for Iran curbing its uranium enrichment. U.N. inspectors say Iran is complying with the agreement, and European countries are trying to salvage the deal, saying it provides the best means for preventing Tehran from developing nuclear weapons.

President Donald Trump was a harsh critic of the agreement, saying it was too generous and did nothing to restrain Iran’s support for militant groups like the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Palestinian Hamas or its meddling in Syria, Iraq and Yemen — none of which was part of the deal.

His administration has demanded Iran overhaul its regional policies in return for the lifting of sanctions, while Tehran appears to be waiting Trump out, hoping a future U.S. administration returns to the nuclear deal.

Mohammad Esfahanian, Javad’s 86-year-old cousin and the head of the Kashan Carpet Union, blamed his own country’s leaders for the crisis, saying “when you start cursing others in the world, they become your enemy.”

“Politics and economy are not separate from each other. If 10 stores sold the same good, which one would you buy it from? The one you have a better relationship with and the one that has a better behavior, of course.”

Asian stocks sink after Wall Street dives on rate hike

By JOE McDONALD, AP Business Writer

BEIJING (AP) — Asian stock markets sank Thursday after the Federal Reserve raised U.S. interest rates and Wall Street dived to a 15-month low.

KEEPING SCORE: Tokyo’s Nikkei 225 index fell 1.7 percent to 20,631.45 points and the Shanghai Composite Index lost 0.4 percent to 2,538.79. Hong Kong’s Hang Seng retreated 0.4 percent to 25,748.54 and Seoul’s Kospi lost 0.6 percent to 2,066.09. Sydney’s S&P-ASX 200 shed 0.3 percent to 5,561.00 and Taiwan also declined. Benchmarks in New Zealand, Singapore and Kuala Lumpur advanced.

FED WATCH: The Fed raised its key interest rate for a fourth time this year to reflect U.S. economic strength and said it plans more increases next year. The increase lifted the Fed’s benchmark rate to its highest level since the 2008 global financial crisis. The Fed said it expects two rate increases next year instead of three. Investors were disappointed Chairman Jerome Powell failed to go further in indicating a slowdown in the pace of increases.

WALL STREET: Stocks gave up a rally and plunged, sending the market to its lowest level since September 2017. The Dow Jones Industrial Average swung from a gain to close down 1.5 percent at 23,323.66. The Standard & Poor’s 500 skidded 1.5 percent to 2,506.96. It has lost 9.2 percent this month. The Nasdaq composite gave up 2.2 percent to 6,636.83.

ANALYST’S TAKE: With headwinds to growth and inflation stabilizing, “the Fed can afford to slow down from here,” said Shane Oliver of AMP Capital in a report. “A more cautious Fed should provide some support for markets although more falls are possible into early next year before markets bottom and head higher as investors realize the US/global economy is not going into recession soon.”

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CHINA LENDING: Beijing unexpectedly announced a 100 billion yuan (\$15 billion) lending program to support entrepreneurs. Financial analysts saw the "targeted easing" as a sign policymakers want to shore up economic growth without reigniting a rise in national debt levels.

ENERGY: Benchmark U.S. crude lost 77 cents to \$47.40 per barrel in electronic trading on the New York Mercantile Exchange. The contract jumped \$1.57 on Wednesday to close at \$48.17. Brent crude, used to price international oils, retreated 65 cents to \$56.59 per barrel in London. It gained 98 cents the previous session to close at \$57.24.

CURRENCY: The dollar eased to 112.41 yen from Wednesday's 112.44 yen. The euro gained to \$1.1381 from \$1.1375.

Today in History By The Associated Press

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Dec. 20, the 354th day of 2018. There are 11 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 20, 1989, the United States launched Operation Just Cause, sending troops into Panama to topple the government of Gen. Manuel Noriega.

On this date:

In 1803, the Louisiana Purchase was completed as ownership of the territory was formally transferred from France to the United States.

In 1860, South Carolina became the first state to secede from the Union as all 169 delegates to a special convention in Charleston voted in favor of separation.

In 1864, Confederate forces evacuated Savannah, Georgia, as Union Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman nearly completed his "March to the Sea."

In 1924, Adolf Hitler was released from prison after serving nine months for his role in the Beer Hall Putsch.

In 1963, the Berlin Wall was opened for the first time to West Berliners, who were allowed one-day visits to relatives in the Eastern sector for the holidays.

In 1968, author John Steinbeck died in New York at age 66.

In 1987, more than 4,300 people were killed when the Dona Paz, a Philippine passenger ship, collided with the tanker Vector off Mindoro island.

In 1995, an American Airlines Boeing 757 en route to Cali, Colombia, slammed into a mountain, killing all but four of the 163 people aboard. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, NATO began its peacekeeping mission, taking over from the United Nations.

In 1996, Astronomer Carl Sagan died in Seattle at age 62.

In 1999, the Vermont Supreme Court ruled that homosexual couples were entitled to the same benefits and protections as wedded couples of the opposite sex.

In 2001, the U.N. Security Council authorized a multinational force for Afghanistan.

In 2005, a federal judge ruled that "intelligent design" could not be mentioned in biology classes in a Pennsylvania public school district, delivering a stinging attack on the Dover Area School Board.

Ten years ago: A Continental Airlines Boeing 737-500 taking off from Denver veered off the runway into a ravine, injuring 37 people. Olga Lepeshinskaya, the Bolshoi Ballet's prima ballerina for three decades during Soviet times, died in Moscow at age 92. Movie director Robert Mulligan ("To Kill a Mockingbird") died in Lyme, Conn. at age 83.

Five years ago: Russian President Vladimir Putin pardoned jailed tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky (mih-hah-EEL' khoh-dohr-KAHV'-skee), who had spent 10 years in prison on charges of tax evasion and embezzlement. A federal judge struck down Utah's ban on same-sex marriage.

One year ago: The House gave final congressional approval to a \$1.5 trillion tax overhaul, the biggest package of tax changes in a generation and the first major legislative achievement of President Donald Trump and House and Senate Republicans; some Republicans warned of a potential backlash against an

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overhaul that offered corporations and wealthy taxpayers the biggest benefits. Cardinal Bernard Law, the disgraced former archbishop of Boston, died in Rome at the age of 86; his failure to stop child molesters in the priesthood had triggered a crisis in American Catholicism.

Today's Birthdays: Original Mouseketeer Tommy Cole (TV: "The Mickey Mouse Club") is 77. Rhythm and blues singer-musician Walter "Wolfman" Washington is 75. Rock musician-music producer Bobby Colomby is 74. Rock musician Peter Criss is 73. Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue is 72. Psychic/illusionist Uri Geller is 72. Producer Dick Wolf ("Law & Order") is 72. Rock musician Alan Parsons is 70. Actress Jenny Agutter is 66. Actor Michael Badalucco is 64. Actress Blanche Baker is 62. Rock singer Billy Bragg is 61. Rock singer-musician Mike Watt (The Secondmen, Minutemen, FIREHOSE) is 61. Actor Joel Gretsch is 55. Country singer Kris Tyler is 54. Rock singer Chris Robinson is 52. Actress Nicole deBoer is 48. Movie director Todd Phillips is 48. Singer David Cook ("American Idol") is 36. Actor Jonah Hill is 35. Actor Bob Morley is 34. Singer JoJo is 28. Actor Colin Woodell is 27.

Thought for Today: "Experience teaches you that the man who looks you straight in the eye, particularly if he adds a firm handshake, is hiding something." — Clifton Fadiman, American author, editor and radio personality (1904-1999).