

Groton Daily Independent

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There is no sense in punishing your future for the mistakes of your past.
Forgive yourself, grow from it, and then let it go.

-MELANIE KOULOURIS



Due to roster issues with the Britton-Hecla JH Girls Basketball team their will be only one JH game on Dec. 13. The game will begin at 5:15 in the GHS Arena

Help Wanted

The Groton Area School District is accepting applications for the position of Certified Sign Language Interpreter. Applicants should complete and submit the certified staff application form along with a current cover letter, resume, and three letters of recommendation. All materials should be submitted to Joe Schwan, Superintendent PO Box 410 Groton, SD 57445. EOE (1213.1227)

Closing for Inventory

We will be closing at Noon
on Wednesday, Dec. 18th
for Inventory

We will be reopening for normal hours on
Thursday, Dec. 19th

Thank you for your patronage!

S & S Lumber

HARDWARE HANK

201 East Hwy 12 • 605/397-2361

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

The recycling trailer is located at 10 East Railroad Ave. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.

Results & Action: Producers will see changes in GFP Wildlife Damage Management and Animal Damage Control Programs

External Review of South Dakota's Wildlife Damage Management and Animal Damage Control Programs Complete

PIERRE S.D. – In the spring of 2019, South Dakota Governor Kristi Noem announced that the Wildlife Management Institute (WMI) would conduct an external review of South Dakota's Wildlife Damage Management and Animal Damage Control programs. The external review is now complete, and the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks (GFP) is working to act on the review findings.

"Game, Fish and Parks welcomed this review," said Kelly Hepler, GFP Secretary. "Landowners and producers in our state are important partners in wildlife management, and we want to ensure the programs and services we provide for minimizing wildlife damage are operating at the highest level. We look forward to working with Governor Noem and the Legislature to carry out the key action items."

Producers will now see an increase in flight hours dedicated to aerial predator control. GFP will add 300 flight hours, statewide, with two additional pilots. These enhancements will be in addition to the current levels of 1,000 – 1,200 hours of aerial predator control that are flown annually.

The agency will also make a request to the Legislature to provide two additional full-time employees dedicated to wildlife damage management. The increase in full-time employees will allow district sizes in western South Dakota to be reduced, which means more efficient response times to producers' requests for assistance.

In addition to these changes, GFP will begin using enhanced equipment such as thermal imaging technology for predator control activities. Moving ahead, GFP will have a clear focus on resolving ongoing coyote depredation events throughout the year particularly from February through June, which is the primary calving and lambing season. These are important steps in assisting South Dakota livestock producers.

"Engagement and public input from key stakeholders have helped shape the next direction in providing quality services and programs for wildlife damage management in South Dakota," said Governor Noem. "Now we're taking action to continue building relationships and partnerships with landowners and producers while resolving ongoing depredation, especially when it comes to coyotes."

Combined with these immediate steps, GFP will develop a strategic plan to carry out the recommendations made by WMI through the review process.

"Our agency is focused on customer satisfaction," said Hepler. "As this plan is developed and executed, we will host regional forums with landowners, producers and other stakeholders to be sure they are being heard and they are receiving the services they need. We value their partnerships and look forward to making positive changes to our wildlife damage management programs."

The WMI review process looked at the past 10 years of both the Wildlife Damage Management and Animal Damage Control programs offered by GFP, and surveyed South Dakota landowners and producers. The final report will be presented to the GFP Commission at their December meeting. The full report can be found on the GFP website.

Arts nonprofits need your holiday generosity

By Jim Speirs, Executive Director, Arts South Dakota

December marks the season of giving. As we consider those to whom we wish to be generous, we need to remember our friends in the nonprofit arts community. Throughout the nation, arts organizations are looking to audiences, patrons and arts advocates to help fill their stockings with the funding that will carry the arts through the new year.

Here in South Dakota, we have a vibrant cultural environment. Community arts councils, local schools and special events all help to bring a holiday focus to performances, exhibitions and seasonal shows—and South Dakotans turn out to fill auditoriums across the state. As important as those ticket sales are to the strength of the creative industry, charitable end-of-year giving to arts nonprofits is equally vital to maintaining our state's arts opportunities.

We have a unique nonprofit ecosystem in our country that depends on generous donations and active volunteers, especially this time of year. The arts community is fortunate in the continued support of advocates of all ages, not just in the larger cities, but in communities of every size.

Recent Arts Happy Hour gatherings in Spearfish, Pierre, De Smet, Sioux Falls and Brookings underscored the wide appeal of our state's cultural landscape and the enthusiasm of South Dakotans everywhere for the arts. An ever-growing number of people understand that a strong arts industry and lively arts community are vital to the future of our state—and their willingness to support our creative environment with dollars and volunteer time is also growing.

This is the time of year for all of us to remember that the arts community does not thrive without individual support. Your favorite arts nonprofit organization probably has an online system for you to support its efforts financially, or simply call them up and ask how you can help. For more information about arts nonprofits, community arts councils and a calendar of upcoming arts events to help celebrate the season, check out our website at www.ArtsSouthDakota.org.



S.D. Farmers Union President Says USMCA Does Nothing for South Dakota Family Farmers & Ranchers

HURON, S.D. - The U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) released earlier this week does not improve market conditions for South Dakota's family farmers and ranchers who are struggling, says S.D. Farmers Union President, Doug Sombke.

"South Dakota's farmers and ranchers are no better off with the USMCA than they were before. Leaders had opportunities to make additions to this trade agreement which could really help, like reinstating Country of Origin Labeling (COOL), and it didn't happen," explains Sombke, a fourth-generation crop and cattle farmer who leads one of the state's largest agriculture organizations.

Disappointed with Congressional leaders for missing yet another opportunity to improve the dire market conditions facing farmers and ranchers, Sombke says the agreement remains largely similar to its predecessor, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). "Basically, politicians started the house on fire, now they want credit for putting it out, while it's still burning here in South Dakota, for agriculture."



Doug Sombke

Dedicated to Serving South Dakota Agriculture

HURON, S.D. - Four South Dakota farmers were elected to serve S.D. Farmers Union (SDFU) members during the organization's 2019 State Convention held in Aberdeen December 10-11.

Conde farmer, Doug Sombke was re-elected to serve as SDFU President and Lake Preston farmer, Wayne Soren was re-elected to serve as SDFU Vice President. Wessington Springs farmer, Scott Kolousek was newly elected to serve on the board of directors representing District 2 and Parade rancher, Oren Lesmeister was newly elected to serve on the board of directors representing District 6.

Skin in the game

Like the more than 16,000 members they represent, these leaders are farmers and ranchers. Considering the current challenges facing South Dakota's family farmers and ranchers, Doug Sombke says members can rely on their leadership team. "This is a grass-roots organization. Our members vote on the policy we advocate for. Our members vote on who will lead them. We understand our members' concerns and challenges because all of us serving on the leadership team are farmers and ranchers too."

Sombke has been actively involved in SDFU since the early 1980s when he and his wife, Mel, were struggling young farmers. Today, as he watches his sons as well as many other South Dakota farmers struggle due to the extreme weather and market conditions, he remains driven to provide support, guidance and vision for 2020 and beyond. "It's not easy. Like all farmers and ranchers, the current situation makes it tough to keep a positive outlook. I see optimism in the unity this crisis has brought about. Together, we have made change in the past. Together, we will continue to make positive change."

For Kolousek, becoming more involved in SDFU is a proactive step he can take to impact change.

"When it comes to service, first I give my time to my church, then it's Farmers Union because I am a farmer. This is our livelihood," explains Kolousek, who raises cattle and some row crops with his parents and wife, Amber.

Kolousek became actively involved in Farmers Union after he and Amber participated in the 2014 D.C. Fly-In. Through the experience of meeting with Congressional leaders and staff from South Dakota as well as states where agriculture does not have a large impact on the economy, the fifth-generation farmer says he realized Farmers Union gives a strong voice to family farmers and ranchers and policy that can make positive change.

"As farmers we need to stand up and work to make change," Kolousek says. "We are being taken advantage of through corporate mergers. These consolidations not only impact the price of inputs, but because of packer consolidation, it impacts the price we receive for our cattle as well. The beef industry is my dad and my bread and butter."

Prior to being elected to serve on the state board of directors, Kolousek served as President of Jerauld County Farmer Union. In this role, he worked to increase membership and his efforts paid off. By asking friends and neighbors, he was able to boost membership by 50 percent. "Getting young people involved is a focus, and farmers in my generation as well," explains the 44-year-old father of four.

To accomplish this, he and Amber decided to try something new. Instead of hosting their county's annual meeting in the community center, where the previous year only five members showed up, they hosted a



Courtesy of SDFU

Conde farmer, Doug Sombke was re-elected to serve as S.D. Farmers Union President during the organization's State Convention held in Aberdeen December 10-11, 2019.

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Bar-B-Que on their farm. Forty-five members showed up. "In addition to existing members, I also invited every person in my phone who had ever expressed interest in Farmers Union. And we signed up four new members that evening."

Kolousek's comments and desire to reach out to young farmers, reminded Soren of why he got involved nearly 40 years ago. Like today, times were tough in the 80s. "There were a lot of older members who worked to be supportive and uplifting to us young farmers, during a time when many farmers were saying, "I don't want my kids coming back." I appreciated their encouragement. And as a mature farmer today, I feel like I need to provide this support and encouragement to the next generation."

A crop and cattle producer, Soren sees SDFU as providing hope and supporting policy with vision. "Look at our policy work on ethanol and Country of Origin Labeling. We don't give up. When everyone was saying E15 is where we need to be, Farmers Union said, "Wait a minute, E30 is where we need to be. It's good for consumers, it's good for farmers, it's good for the environment." And, look at the Governor's policy on E30. Same with truth in labeling. We continue to fight to get COOL back. In the meantime, we are seeing some positive legislation for labeling."

In his role as Vice President, Soren says members can continue to rely on him to join with leadership to continue to ensure the voice of South Dakota's family farmers and ranchers is heard. "We are not afraid to keep pushing for legislation that works for family farmers and ranchers. Farmers Union is often the lone voice saying, "wait a minute here, there is a better way."

Partnering with others who share SDFU vision helps our organization create positive change; whether it's teaming up with Glacial Lakes Energy, helping promote their E30 Challenge or supporting legislators working to get industrial hemp legislation passed. "We know one large voice is better than a bunch of individual voices," explains Lesmeister, a rancher and small business owner who also serves as District 28-A State Representative. In his new role on the board of directors, he is eager to continue to work to build partnerships. "If you are able to find common ground, even if all your interests are not aligned, it strengthens your voice. My dad used to tell me, "If you have an argument, you both walk away with nothing resolved. If you have a conversation, then you both learn something." I want to continue the conversation."

South Dakota Snowmobile Trails Open Dec. 15

PIERRE, S.D. – Snowmobile trails across South Dakota open Sunday, Dec. 15.

Officials in the Black Hills say snow conditions will vary to start the season. The Black Hills has seen snow accumulation, but many trails are on Forest Service roads and have been plowed.

“It’s important that snowmobilers pick up a 2019-2020 trail map,” reminds Black Hills trails manager Shannon Percy. “The trail system incurs a number of re-routes each year and having a current map will help avoid trespassing.”

Snowmobile trail maps can be picked up at various businesses along the trails. Riders can request a copy by calling 605.584.3896 or 605.773.2885.

East River trails will see minimal grooming opening day. Snowmobilers are encouraged to check local conditions before riding and keep in mind many areas across eastern South Dakota have standing water.

Trail condition updates are posted to Twitter accounts dedicated to both the Black Hills and the East River trails (twitter.com/SDsnowBHills and twitter.com/SDsnowEast). With various cameras along the trails, current images of snow conditions can be found online at gfp.sd.gov/snowmobiling.

A \$20 snowmobile motorcycle trail pass is available for residents who use a motorcycle conversion kit. Those permits can be picked up at the Black Hills Trails office in Lead, 605.584.3896, or at Farm Island Recreation Area in Pierre, 605.773.2885.

The snowmobile season runs until March 31.

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Today



Areas Wintry
Mix and
Patchy Fog
then Patchy
Fog

High: 25 °F

Tonight



Partly Cloudy

Low: -2 °F

Saturday



Cold

High: 4 °F

Saturday
Night



Partly Cloudy

Low: -13 °F

Sunday



Cold

High: 9 °F



Relatively Mild Today, Until The Cold Front Passes

This Morning

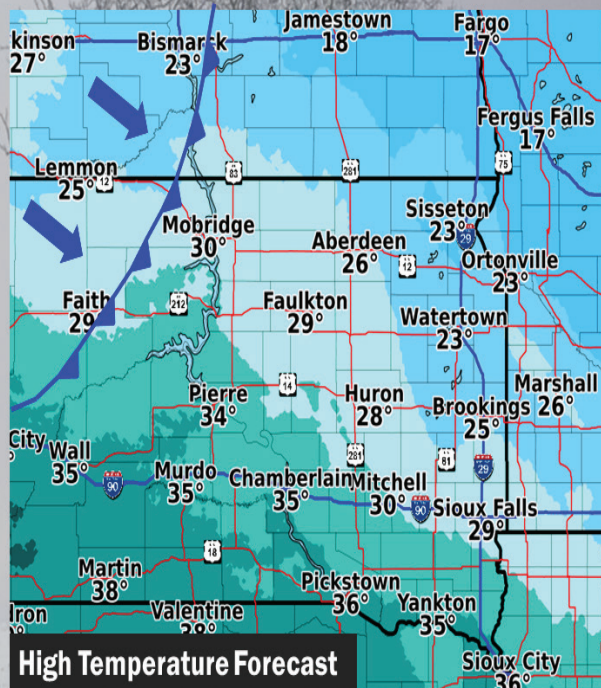
Mostly cloudy, areas of fog.
Freezing drizzle possible along/east of the
James Valley.

This Afternoon

Mostly cloudy.
Gusty northwest winds, possible drifting
snow across roads.

This Evening/Tonight

Gusty northwest winds continue across
eastern SD and west central MN.
Much colder, lows 5 to -5 F.



NWS Aberdeen, SD

Updated: 12/13/2019 5:46 AM Central

Fog and/or freezing drizzle is possible for some until this afternoon, when a cold front moves through. Gusty winds and much colder air will follow. High temperatures on Saturday will be in the single digits.

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Today in Weather History

December 13, 2008: An intense low-pressure area moved out of the Rockies and across the Central Plains bringing widespread snow, blizzard conditions, and extreme winds chills to central and northeast South Dakota as well as west central Minnesota into the early morning hours of the 15th. Snowfall amounts of 1 to as much as 12 inches along with winds gusting to 50 mph caused widespread near zero visibilities and dangerous travel conditions. Winds chills fell into the 35 below to 45 below zero range. Many vehicles became stuck or stranded along several highways and along Interstates 29 and 90. Interstate 90 was closed from the Wyoming line to Murdo from late on the 13th until the morning of the 14th. Interstate 29 was also closed for much of the 14th. The Onida, Agar, and Gettysburg Volunteer Fire Department found it difficult to respond to a structure fire south of Gettysburg. Due to whiteout conditions, the structure was lost to the fire by the time the fire departments arrived. Most area schools were closed on Monday due to the road conditions along with the bitter cold wind chills. Some of the heaviest snowfall amounts included: 6 inches at Watertown, Browns Valley, Sisseton, Waubay, and Castlewood; 7 inches at Ortonville, Webster, Clear Lake, Faulkton, and Aberdeen; 8 inches at Milbank, 9 inches at Britton and Wheaton; 10 inches at Clear Lake, and 12 inches at Roscoe. Mobridge received 2 inches and Pierre received 4 inches of snowfall with this storm

December 13, 1997: A freak cold snap and snowstorm struck parts of northern Mexico left 12 people dead, and the area paralyzed. It snowed in the city of Guadalajara for the first time since 1881, leaving amazed residents to gawk at the white stuff and make snowmen. The temperature plunged to 5 degrees in Chihuahua.

1915 - A heavy snowstorm kicked off the snowiest winter in modern records for western New England. (The Weather Channel)

1962 - A severe Florida freeze occurred. Morning lows reached 35 degrees at Miami, 18 degrees at Tampa, and 12 degrees at Jacksonville. It was the coldest December weather of the 20th century and caused millions of dollars damage to crops and foliage. In Georgia, the morning low of 9 degrees below zero at Blairsville established a state record for the month of December. (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A major winter storm produced high winds and heavy snow in the Southern Rockies and the Southern High Plains. Snowfall totals in New Mexico ranged up to 25 inches at Cedar Crest, with up to three feet of snow reported in the higher elevations. Winds of 75 mph, with gusts to 124 mph, were reported northeast of Albuquerque NM. El Paso TX was buried under 22.4 inches of snow, including a single storm record of 16.8 inches in 24 hours. The snowfall total surpassed their previous record for an entire winter season of 18.4 inches. Record cold was experienced the next three nights as readings dipped into the single numbers. High winds ushering unseasonably cold air into the southwestern U.S. gusted to 100 mph at Grapevine CA. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Low pressure off the Atlantic coast produced up to a foot of snow in eastern Nassau County and western Suffolk County of southeastern New York State. Mild weather prevailed across the western half of the country. Nine cities reported record high temperatures for the date, including Goodland KS with a reading of 74 degrees. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Strong northwesterly winds, ushering bitterly cold arctic air into the central U.S., produced squalls with heavy snow in the Great Lakes Region. Snowfall totals in Upper Michigan ranged up to 24 inches at Manistique. Nine cities in Arkansas and Texas reported record low temperatures for the date, including Calico Rock AR with a reading of 4 degrees above zero. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

2002 - A powerful Pacific storm system plowed into the western United States during the 13th-16th, producing high winds, heavy rains, significant mountain snowfall and causing 9 deaths (Associated Press). Rainfall amounts exceeding 10 inches occurred in parts of California, and wind gusts over 45 mph produced up to 1.9 million power outages during the period (Pacific Gas & Electric).

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 14 °F at 10:11 PM

Low Temp: 8 °F at 5:20 AM

Wind: 16 mph at 1:26 AM

Day Rain: 0.00

Record High: 57° in 1921

Record Low: -34° in 1917

Average High: 26°F

Average Low: 6°F

Average Precip in Dec.: 0.21

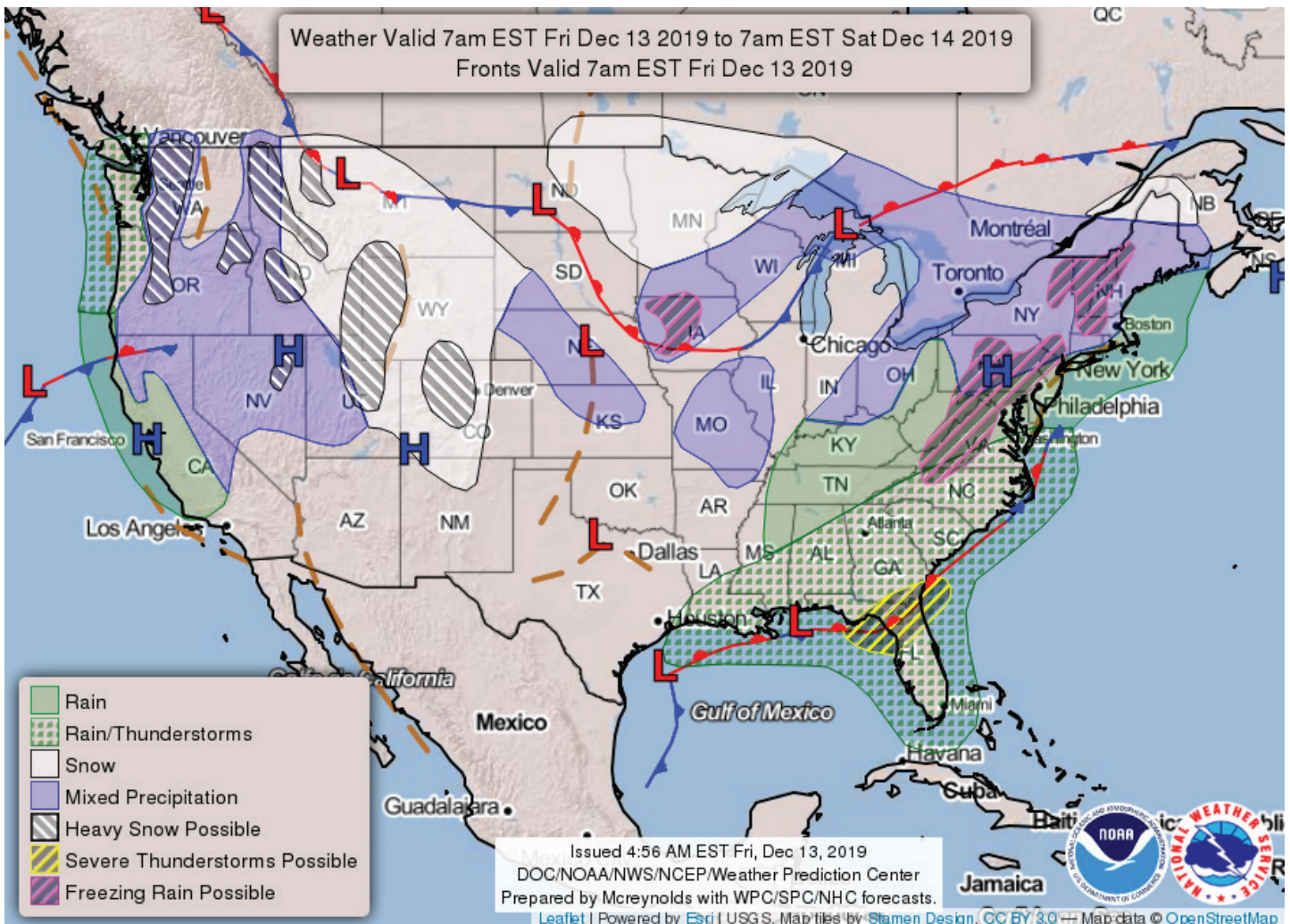
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.11

Average Precip to date: 21.41

Precip Year to Date: 28.06

Sunset Tonight: 4:51 p.m.

Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:06 a.m.



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THE REAL THING!

It has always been difficult for missionary families to be together at special times for important occasions. Often hearts ache for the joy and happiness that bonds hearts and unites loved ones for special reasons and seasons.

The headmaster of a school for the children of missionaries knew that feeling very well. His parents were missionaries, and he spent many birthdays alone as well as many holidays apart from family members. He knew that one of his students, in particular, was having a difficult time one Christmas and decided to visit him in his room.

After talking for a few minutes he asked, "John, what would you like for Christmas this year?"

Looking at a picture of his father on the wall, he said, "I would like my father to step out of that frame."

That's what Jesus did. He "stepped out" of the Old Testament "frames" that prophesied His coming. He became the "real thing" when he walked among the people, laid His hands on the sick, and restored them to health, fed the hungry with bread that would last throughout eternity, and gave the water of life to those dying of thirst.

The Son of God willingly and voluntarily made Himself "nothing" when He assumed a human body and a human nature and became the "real thing." Jesus is God seeing us through human eyes, hearing us with human ears, touching lives with human hands, and loving us with a human heart. In Jesus, we see God with us – Immanuel!

Prayer: Thank You, Father, for sending us the "Real Thing." Through Your Son we know how much You love us, understand us, and know our every need. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Philippians 2:5-11 Who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men.

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2019 Groton SD Community Events

- 12/03/2019 – Christmas Open House 10am-4pm, James Valley Telecommunications
- 12/07/2019 – Santa Day 9am-12pm, Professional Management Services
- 12/07/2019 – Tour of Homes 4pm-7pm, Olive Grove Golf Course (Tickets available at Lori's Pharmacy, Groton Ford, Hair & Co (Aberdeen) and Vicki Walter (605) 380-0480)
- 12/19/2019 – Christmas Open House 10am-4pm, Wells Fargo Bank
- 12/20/2019 – Holiday Bake Sale & Open House 9am-4pm, Groton Community Transit
 - Bingo: every Wednesday at the Legion Post #39

2020 Groton SD Community Events

- 01/26/2020 Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm (Last Sunday of January)
- 04/04/2020 Groton Lions Club Easter Egg Hunt, 10 a.m. Sharp (Saturday a week before Easter Weekend)
- 04/25/2020 Fireman's Stag (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
- 04/26/2020 Father/Daughter dance.
- 05/02/2020 Spring City-Wide Rummage Sales, 8 a.m.-3 p.m. (1st Saturday in May)
- 05/25/2020 Groton American Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
- 06/8-10/2020 St. John's VBS
- 07/04/2020 Firecracker Golf Tourney (4th of July)
Groton Hosting State B American Legion Baseball Tournament
- 07/12/2020 Summer Fest/Car Show
- 09/12/2020 Fall City-Wide Rummage Sales, 8 a.m.-3 p.m. (1st Sat. after Labor Day)
- 10/10/2020 Pumpkin Fest
- 10/31/2020 Groton United Methodist Trunk or Treat (Halloween)
- 11/14/2020 Groton American Legion Post #39 Annual Turkey Party (Saturday closest to Veteran's Day)

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News from the  Associated Press

Sisseton officer escaped injury in gas station shooting

SISSETON, S.D. (AP) — State agents are investigating a shooting at a Sisseton gas station that involved a police officer.

The South Dakota Attorney General's Office says the officer made a traffic stop at the Fuel Max station in Sisseton Wednesday night.

The Argus Leader reports AG spokesman Tim Bormann says one of two men in the vehicle fired a gun at the officer, who was not injured. Bormann says the officer did not return fire.

The two men were taken into custody. Authorities did not release details on how they were arrested. The state Division of Criminal Investigation is investigating the incident.

Thursday's Scores

By The Associated Press

WRESTLING

Sturgis 42, Huron 27

Sturgis 60, Aberdeen Central 9

Rapid City Central 56, Aberdeen Central 23

Rapid City Central 45, Huron 32

South Dakota Governor to push private youth facility reform

By STEPHEN GROVES undefined

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Governor Kristi Noem announced on Thursday that she will push legislation to increase oversight of privately-run treatment facilities for youth after long-standing allegations of abuse were discovered at one facility.

The Republican governor plans to change how private treatment facilities for youth are licensed and inspected by the state. Her recommendations come after an investigative report found that young adults at Aurora Plains Academy in Plankinton suffered physical, mental and sexual abuse for a decade. The state had limited oversight of the facility.

The report from South Dakota News Watch, a non-profit investigative journalism outlet, found that 400 child abuse or neglect complaints were filed against the facility over a decade but only 39 of the complains were investigated by the state. The facility is the only Intensive Residential Treatment Center licensed in the state and treats youth and young adults between the ages of 10 and 20 who have a documented history of physical or sexual aggression.

Children and young adults who were sent to the facility alleged that some staff unnecessarily put them in physical restraints that resulted in rug burbs, black eyes, and injured limbs. Girls at the facility alleged they were touched sexually by staff.

Clinicare Corporation, which operates the Aurora Plains Academy, released a statement that said it welcomed the proposed changes from the governor and that it has has a "strong working relationship" with the state's Department of Social Services.

David Fritsch, the president of Clinicare, said in the statement that he could not comment on specific allegations but noted that the center takes "any allegations of mistreatment of residents very seriously."

Fritsch said the center is in good standing with regulating authorities.

The state used to inspect treatment facilities once a year on an announced visit. That could soon change.

After the report was released in June, Noem ordered the Department of Social Services to recommend reforms to overhaul how private youth treatment facilities are regulated

The Department of Social Services suggested increasing the number of inspections, sometimes making

them unannounced, and legislation that would create an external grievance monitor to respond to complaints. from children and youth. There is also a push for more transparency: the department may open its reports to the public and publish an annual report that would include numbers on how many complaints of abuse and neglect are made against facilities.

Noem said she would follow the agency's recommendations with a push to change the current laws in the state legislature. "We cannot let kids fall through the cracks," she said. "In the 2020 session, I will bring legislation that prioritizes the safety of at-risk kids."

Defense bill allots billions to South Dakota military base

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — The \$738 billion defense spending bill awaiting approval by the U.S. Senate allocates billions in funding to improve a South Dakota military base.

The measure designates \$3 billion to continue the development of a new long-range bomber called the B-21 Raider at the Ellsworth Air Force Base near Rapid City. Another \$24.8 million will be used to install a new hydrant fuel system at the base.

The Department of Defense said in a justification report to Congress that the new system is needed to serve the base's north-ramp hangars and Live Ordnance Loading Area, and that it would serve as a backup for an existing hydrant fuel system, the Rapid City Journal reported.

"Adequate fuel supply is required to expedite safe and efficient generation of aircraft sorties," the Defense Department wrote.

The Senate and House passed different versions of the defense bill for fiscal 2020. This week, a joint committee reached a compromise and released a report outlining the budget. The measure asks for a 3% military pay raise.

The House on Wednesday approved the bill. The Senate is expected to follow suit by next week.

The joint committee directed the Air Force to provide a briefing by Feb. 29 on plans to increase the readiness of B-1 bomber planes. It also instructed the U.S. comptroller general to investigate the Department of Defense's efforts to clean up contamination from polyfluoroalkyl substances, known as PFAS, in and around military bases across the nation.

PFAS chemicals, which can cause cancer and other health problems, were found in private wells near Ellsworth. Subsequently, some affected residents have been provided with free, safe water from the base.

DeGrood is new bishop of the Diocese of Sioux Falls

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — The Catholic Diocese of Sioux Falls has a new bishop.

Rev. Donald DeGrood was to be introduced Thursday as the successor to Bishop Paul Swain, who submitted his resignation at age 75 last September, per canon law.

DeGrood most recently served as pastor of St. John the Baptist Church in Savage, Minnesota, which is part of the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis.

DeGrood will be ordained a bishop and installed on February 13.

Mass opioid abuse is 'destabilizing' world's poorest nations

By EMILY SCHMALL and CLAIRE GALOFARO Associated Press

KAPURTHALA, India (AP) — Reports rolled in with escalating urgency — pills seized by the truckload, pills swallowed by schoolchildren, pills in the pockets of dead terrorists.

These pills, the world has been told, are safer than the OxyContin, the Vicodins, the fentanyl that have wreaked so much devastation. But now they are the root of what the United Nations named "the other opioid crisis" — an epidemic featured in fewer headlines than the American one, as it rages through the planet's most vulnerable countries.

Mass abuse of the opioid tramadol spans continents, from India to Africa to the Middle East, creating international havoc some experts blame on a loophole in narcotics regulation and a miscalculation of the

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drug's danger. The man-made opioid was touted as a way to relieve pain with little risk of abuse. Unlike other opioids, tramadol flowed freely around the world, unburdened by international controls that track most dangerous drugs.

But abuse is now so rampant that some countries are asking international authorities to intervene.

This story was produced with support from the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting.

Grunenthal, the German company that originally made the drug, is campaigning for the status quo, arguing that it's largely illicit counterfeit pills causing problems. International regulations make narcotics difficult to get in countries with disorganized health systems, the company says, and adding tramadol to the list would deprive suffering patients access to any opioid at all.

"This is a huge public health dilemma," said Dr. Gilles Forte, the secretary of the World Health Organization's committee that recommends how drugs should be regulated. Tramadol is available in war zones and impoverished nations because it is unregulated. But it is widely abused for the same exact reason. "It's a really very complicated balance to strike."

Tramadol has not been as deadly as other opioids, and the crisis isn't killing with the ferocity of America's struggle with the drugs. Still, individual governments from the U.S. to Egypt to Ukraine have realized the drug's dangers are greater than was believed and have worked to rein in the tramadol trade. The north Indian state of Punjab, the center of India's opioid epidemic, was the latest to crack down. The pills were everywhere, as legitimate medication sold in pharmacies, but also illicit counterfeits hawked by street vendors.

This year, authorities seized hundreds of thousands of tablets, banned most pharmacy sales and shut down pill factories, pushing the price from 35 cents for a 10-pack to \$14. The government opened a network of treatment centers, fearing those who had become opioid addicted would resort to heroin out of desperation. Hordes of people rushed in, seeking help in managing excruciating withdrawal.

For some, tramadol had become as essential as food.

"Like if you don't eat, you start to feel hungry. Similar is the case with not taking it," said auto shop welder Deepak Arora, a gaunt 30-year-old who took 15 tablets day, so much he had to steal from his family to pay for pills. "You are like a dead person."

Jeffery Bawa, an officer with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, realized what was happening in 2016, when he traveled to Mali in western Africa, one of the world's poorest countries, gripped by civil war and terrorism. They asked people for their most pressing concerns. Most did not say hunger or violence. They said tramadol.

One woman said children stumble down the streets, high on the opioid; parents add it to tea to dull the ache of hunger. Nigerian officials said at a United Nations meeting on tramadol trafficking that the number of people there living with addiction is now far higher than the number with AIDS or HIV.

Tramadol is so pervasive in Cameroon scientists a few years ago believed they'd discovered a natural version in tree roots. But it was not natural at all: Farmers bought pills and fed them to their cattle to ward off the effects of debilitating heat. Their waste contaminated the soil, and the chemical seeped into the trees.

Police began finding pills on terrorists, who traffic it to fund their networks and take it to bolster their capacity for violence, Bawa said.

Most of it was coming from India. The country's sprawling pharmaceutical industry is fueled by cheap generics. Pill factories produce knock-offs and ship them in bulk around the world, in doses far exceeding medical limits.

In 2017, law enforcement reported that \$75 million worth of tramadol from India was confiscated en route to the Islamic State terror group. Authorities intercepted 600,000 tablets headed for Boko Haram. Another 3 million were found in a pickup truck in Niger, in boxes disguised with U.N. logos. The agency warned that tramadol was playing "a direct role in the destabilization of the region."

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"We cannot let the situation get any further out of control," that alert read.

Grunenthal maintains that tramadol has a low risk of abuse; most of the pills causing trouble are knock-offs, not legitimate pharmaceuticals, and American surveys have shown lower levels of abuse than other prescription painkillers. The company submitted a report to the WHO in 2014, saying that the abuse evident in "a limited number of countries," should be viewed "in the context of the political and social instabilities in the region."

But some wealthy countries worried about increasing abuse also have acted to contain the drug.

The United Kingdom and United States both regulated it in 2014. Tramadol was uncontrolled in Denmark until 2017, when journalists asked doctors to review studies submitted to regulators to support the claim that it has a low risk for addiction, said Dr. Karsten Juhl Jorgensen, acting director of the Nordic Cochrane Centre and one of the physicians who analyzed the materials. They all agreed that the documents did not prove it's safer.

"We know that opioids are some of the most addictive drugs on the face of the planet, so the claim that you've developed one that's not addictive, that's an extraordinary claim, and extraordinary claims require evidence. And it just wasn't there," said Jorgensen. "We've all been cheated, and people are angry about that."

Jorgensen compares claims that tramadol is low risk to those made by American companies now facing thousands of lawsuits alleging misleading campaigns touting the safety of opioids unleashed the U.S. addiction epidemic.

Stefano Berterame, a chief at the International Narcotics Control Board, said there is a critical difference: The crisis is not as deadly as the American one, which began with prescription opioids and transitioned to heroin and fentanyl. Tramadol does not as routinely cause the respiratory depression that leads to overdose death.

But it is mostly afflicting poor nations, where overdose statistics are erratic, he said, so the true toll of tramadol is unknown.

The United Nations established the International Narcotics Control Board in 1961 to spare the world the "serious evil" of addiction. It has since tracked most opioids.

Tramadol's exemption means authorization isn't required as the drug moves across borders. Its easy availability also leads to confusion about what tramadol even is, experts say. In many countries, it is thought to be a mood enhancer or treatment for depression and post-traumatic stress. Some take it to improve sexual stamina or endure grueling labor.

Grunenthal synthesized tramadol in the 1960s, as the company was embroiled in scandal over its marketing of the sedative thalidomide, which caused extreme birth defects in thousands of babies whose mothers took it. Tramadol was initially believed to have a low risk of abuse because initial trials studied injected tramadol, the most potent route for most opioids. But researchers later found that tramadol releases a far more powerful dose taken orally because of how it is metabolized by the liver.

Tramadol's worldwide market quickly expanded in the 1990s. In 2000, the WHO, which assesses medications and recommends scheduling, noted reports of dependence. A committee has reviewed the drug numerous times since, recommended it remain under surveillance but declined to add international regulation.

There is no alternative to tramadol, said Forte, the committee's secretary. It is the only opioid available in some of the world's most desperate places; relief organizations rely on it in war zones and natural disasters. It is used extensively not because it is a particularly good medication, he said. The most effective opioid is morphine, but morphine is strictly controlled and countries in crisis fear abuse. Tramadol became the default precisely because it's uncontrolled.

The WHO is analyzing whether any other drug could take its place but have so far found none. Meanwhile, Forte said, the agency is working with battered nations to ferret out counterfeits.

Legitimate tramadol remains a lucrative business: market research estimates the global market amounts to around \$1.4 billion, according to Grunenthal. The medication long ago lost its patent protection. It is

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now manufactured by many companies and sold under some 500 brand names. Grunenthal markets it as Tramal as well as Zaldiar, tramadol combined with paracetamol. In 2018, those products brought in 174 million euros (\$191 million), according to the company's annual report.

"Our purpose at Grunenthal is to develop and deliver medicines and solutions which address the unmet needs of patients with the goal of improving their quality of life," the company wrote in a statement that said it acknowledges opioids pose a risk of abuse and addiction. "We do so with the highest ethical standards."

Grunenthal also sells other opioids and is expanding around the world. The Associated Press this year revealed executives were swept up in an Italian corruption case alleging they illegally paid a doctor to promote the use of opioids.

The company has campaigned to keep tramadol unregulated. It funded surveys that found regulation would impede pain treatment and paid consultants to travel to the WHO to make their case that it's safer than other opioids.

Spokesman Stepan Kracala said regulation would not necessarily curtail illicit trade and could backfire: Some desperate pain patients turn to the black market if no legal options exist. Egypt's long struggle with tramadol abuse is an example, he said. The country enacted strict regulation in 2012 and a later survey found some suffering from cancer using counterfeit tramadol for relief.

Kracala also pointed to regulatory decisions as proof of tramadol's comparable safety: The U.S. in 2014 added tramadol to its list of controlled substances but included it in a lesser category than opioids like oxycodone or morphine, signaling it is less risky.

There are growing calls to change that.

The Mayo Clinic hospital in Minnesota worked to reduce opioids prescribed post-surgery as the American epidemic escalated, said surgeon Cornelius Thiels. Doctors there started shifting patients to tramadol because it was billed as safer. But Thiels and his colleagues analyzed prescription data and were surprised to find patients prescribed tramadol were just as likely to move on to long-term use.

They published their findings this year to alert authorities, he said: "There is no safe opioid. Tramadol is not a safe alternative. It's a mistake that we didn't figure it out sooner. It's unfortunate that it took us this long. There's a lot more that we need to learn about it, but I think we know enough that we also can't wait around to act on this."

Indian regulators knew the massive quantities manufactured in the country were spilling over domestically and countless Indians were addicted. But S.K. Jha, responsible for the northern region of India's Narcotics Control Bureau, said he was shocked to learn in 2018 that tramadol from India was ravaging African nations. They realized then they needed to act, he said.

India regulated tramadol in April 2018. Regulators say exports overseas and abuse at home came down. But they acknowledge that the vastness of the pharmaceutical industry and the ingenuity of traffickers makes curtailing abuse and illegal exports all but impossible. Tramadol is still easy to find.

Jyoti Rani stood on her front steps and pointed to house after house where she said tramadol is still sold in her neighborhood of narrow roads and open drains, where school-aged boys sit hunched over the street in the middle of a weekday.

Rani's addiction began with heroin. When her 14-year-old son died, she fell into depression.

"I wanted to kill myself, but I ended up becoming an addict," she cried. A doctor prescribed tramadol to help kick the habit — instead, she formed a new one. She locked herself in her room, not eating or taking care of her two children. Rani used tramadol until she ran out of money and entered treatment. Now her family tells her she's her old self again.

The crackdown on tramadol coincided with the opening of dozens of addiction clinics that administer medicine and counseling to more than 30,000 each day.

"We are trying our level best," Jha said, "but it's a challenge for all of us."

Countries' efforts to control tramadol on their own often fail, particularly in places where addiction has taken hold, according to the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

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India has twice the global average of illicit opiate consumption. Researchers estimate 4 million Indians use heroin or other opioids, and a quarter of them live in the Punjab, India's agricultural heartland bordering Pakistan, where some of the most vulnerable are driven to drugs out of desperation.

Amandeep Kaur was pregnant when her husband died of a heart attack. She turned to the sex trade to make ends meet. She wanted not to feel, and a fellow sex worker suggested tramadol. She had no idea she'd get addicted, but eventually needed three pills to get through the day.

"If I didn't have it I felt lifeless, my body ached as if I was going to die," she said, and joined the line stretching from the addiction clinic's doors.

The Global Opioids project can be seen here. <https://www.apnews.com/GlobalOpioids>

Associated Press journalist Rishi Lekhi contributed to this report.

UK's Johnson claims Brexit mandate as Tories secure majority

By JILL LAWLESS, DANICA KIRKA and MIKE CORDER Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservative Party has won a thumping majority of seats in Britain's Parliament — a decisive outcome to a Brexit-dominated election that should allow Johnson to fulfill his plan to take the U.K. out of the European Union next month.

With 649 of the 650 results declared on Friday, the Conservatives had 364 seats and the main opposition Labour Party 203.

"We did it — we pulled it off, didn't we?" a jubilant Johnson told supporters. "We broke the gridlock, we ended the deadlock, we smashed the roadblock!"

A few hours later, Johnson was whisked to Buckingham Palace to meet with Queen Elizabeth II as part of the constitutional ritual of forming a new government. He is the 14th prime minister to be asked by the monarch to form a government.

Johnson's victory paves the way for Britain's departure from the European Union by Jan. 31.

The victory makes Johnson the most electorally successful Conservative leader since Margaret Thatcher, another politician who was loved and loathed in almost equal measure. It was a disaster for left-wing Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, who faced calls for his resignation even as the results rolled in.

U.S. President Donald Trump congratulated Johnson on Twitter, and said that "Britain and the United States will now be free to strike a massive new trade deal after Brexit."

Corbyn called the result "very disappointing" for his party and said he would not lead Labour into another election, though he said he would lead a period of "reflection" rather than quit immediately.

Results poured in early Friday showing a substantial shift in support to the Conservatives from Labour. In the last election in 2017, the Conservatives won 318 seats and Labour 262.

The result this time delivered the biggest Tory majority since Thatcher's 1980s heyday, and Labour's lowest number of seats since 1935.

The Scottish National Party won almost 50 of Scotland's 59 seats, up from 35 in 2017, a result that will embolden its demands for a new referendum on Scottish independence.

The centrist, pro-EU Liberal Democrats took only about a dozen seats. Lib Dem leader Jo Swinson stepped down after losing in her own Scottish constituency.

The Conservatives took a swath of seats in post-industrial northern England towns that were long Labour strongholds. Labour's vote held up better in London, where the party managed to grab the Putney seat from the Conservatives.

The decisive Conservative showing vindicates Johnson's decision to press for Thursday's early election, which was held nearly two years ahead of schedule. He said that if the Conservatives won a majority, he would get Parliament to ratify his Brexit divorce deal and take the U.K. out of the EU by the current Jan. 31 deadline.

Speaking at the election count in his Uxbridge constituency in suburban London, Johnson said the "his-

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toric" election "gives us now, in this new government, the chance to respect the democratic will of the British people to change this country for the better and to unleash the potential of the entire people of this country."

That message appears to have had strong appeal for Brexit-supporting voters, who turned away from Labour in the party's traditional heartlands and embraced Johnson's promise that the Conservatives would "get Brexit done."

"I think Brexit has dominated, it has dominated everything by the looks of it," said Labour economy spokesman John McDonnell. "We thought other issues could cut through and there would be a wider debate. From this evidence there clearly wasn't."

The prospect of Brexit finally happening more than three years after Britons narrowly voted to leave the EU marks a momentous shift for both the U.K. and the bloc. No country has ever left the union, which was created in the decades after World War II to bring unity to a shattered continent.

But a decisive Conservative victory would also provide some relief to the EU, which has grown tired of Britain's Brexit indecision.

Britain's departure will start a new phase of negotiations on future relations between Britain and the 27 remaining EU members.

EU Council President Charles Michel promised that EU leaders meeting Friday would send a "strong message" to the next British government and parliament about next steps.

"We are ready to negotiate," European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said.

The pound surged when an exit poll forecast the Tory win, jumping over two cents against the dollar, to \$1.3445, the highest in more than a year and a half. Many investors hope the Conservative win will speed up the Brexit process and ease, at least in the short term, some of the uncertainty that has corroded business confidence since the 2016 vote.

Many voters casting ballots on Thursday hoped the election might finally find a way out of the Brexit stalemate in this deeply divided nation. Three and a half years after the U.K. voted by 52%-48% to leave the EU, Britons remain split over whether to leave the 28-nation bloc, and lawmakers have proved incapable of agreeing on departure terms.

Opinion polls had given the Conservatives a steady lead, but the result was considered hard to predict, because the issue of Brexit cuts across traditional party loyalties.

Johnson campaigned relentlessly on a promise to "Get Brexit done" by getting Parliament to ratify his "oven-ready" divorce deal with the EU and take Britain out of the bloc as scheduled on Jan. 31.

The Conservatives focused much of their energy on trying to win in a "red wall" of working-class towns in central and northern England that have elected Labour lawmakers for decades but also voted strongly in 2016 to leave the EU. That effort got a boost when the Brexit Party led by Nigel Farage decided at the last minute not to contest 317 Conservative-held seats to avoid splitting the pro-Brexit vote.

Labour, which is largely but ambiguously pro-EU, faced competition for anti-Brexit voters from the centrist Liberal Democrats, Scottish and Welsh nationalist parties, and the Greens.

But on the whole Labour tried to focus the campaign away from Brexit and onto its radical domestic agenda, vowing to tax the rich, nationalize industries such as railroads and water companies and give everyone in the country free internet access. It campaigned heavily on the future of the National Health Service, a deeply respected institution that has struggled to meet rising demand after nine years of austerity under Conservative-led governments.

Senior Johnson aide Dominic Cummings said that the opponents of the Conservatives just weren't listening to the public outside London.

"After the shock of the referendum, MPs and journalists should have taken a deep breath and had a lot of self-reflection of why they misunderstood what was going on in the country, but instead a lot of people just doubled down on their own ideas," Cummings told Press Association.

"That's why something like this happens against expectations."

Defeat will likely spell the end for Corbyn, a veteran socialist who moved his party sharply to the left after

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taking the helm in 2015, but who now looks to have led his left-of-center party to two electoral defeats since 2017. The 70-year-old left-winger was also accused of allowing anti-Semitism to spread within the party.

"It's Corbyn," said former Labour Cabinet minister Alan Johnson, when asked about the poor result. "We knew he was incapable of leading, we knew he was worse than useless at all the qualities you need to lead a political party."

For many voters, the election offered an unpalatable choice. Both Johnson and Corbyn have personal approval ratings in negative territory, and both have been dogged by questions about their character.

Johnson has been confronted with past broken promises, untruths and offensive statements, from calling the children of single mothers "ignorant, aggressive and illegitimate" to comparing Muslim women who wear face-covering veils to "letter boxes."

Yet, his energy and determination proved persuasive to many voters.

"It's a big relief, looking at the exit polls as they are now, we've finally got that majority a working majority that we have not had for 3 1/2 years," said Conservative-supporting writer Jack Rydeheard. "We've got the opportunity to get Brexit done and get everything else that we promised as well. That's investment in the NHS, schools, hospitals you name it — it's finally a chance to break that deadlock in Parliament."

Gregory Katz, Sheila Norman-Culp and Jo Kearney in London, and Angela Charlton, Raf Casert and Adam Pemble in Brussels contributed to this report.

Follow AP's full coverage of Brexit and British politics at <https://www.apnews.com/Brexit>

House committee to take historic vote on Trump impeachment

By LISA MASCARO and MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House Judiciary Committee is expected to approve articles of impeachment against President Donald Trump on Friday after abruptly shutting down a 14-hour session late Thursday following a marathon slog through Republican amendments aimed at killing the charges.

Approval of the two charges against the president would send the matter to the full House for a vote expected next week.

But the sudden turn late Thursday punctuated the deep split in the Congress, and the nation, over impeaching the Republican president. The committee, made up of some of the most strident lawmakers, clashed all day and into the night as Republicans insisted on lengthy debate over amendments designed to kill the two formal charges against the president but with no hope of winning votes from the majority Democrats.

Chairman Jerrold Nadler, D-N.Y., said the committee would resume at 10 a.m. Friday.

"It is now very late at night," Nadler said after presiding over the two-day session. "I want the members on both sides of the aisle to think about what has happened over these past two days and to search their consciences before they cast their final votes."

Trump is accused, in the first article, of abusing his presidential power by asking Ukraine to investigate his 2020 rival Joe Biden while holding military aid as leverage, and, in the second, of obstructing Congress by blocking the House's efforts to probe his actions.

The Republicans on the panel, blindsided by the move, were livid. When Nadler announced that the committee wouldn't vote until Friday morning, gasps were heard at the dais, and Republicans immediately started yelling "unbelievable" and "they just want to be on TV." Congress is set to be out of session on Friday, and many lawmakers had other plans, some outside Washington.

"This is the kangaroo court that we're talking about" stormed Rep. Doug Collins of Georgia, the top Republican on the panel, who said he had not been consulted on the decision. "They do not care about rules, they have one thing, their hatred of Donald Trump."

Early Friday, Trump took to Twitter to praise the panel's Republicans, saying "they were fantastic yesterday."

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"The Dems have no case at all, but the unity & sheer brilliance of these Republican warriors, all of them, was a beautiful sight to see," he tweeted. "Dems had no answers and wanted out!"

Trump is only the fourth U.S. president to face impeachment proceedings and the first to be running for reelection at the same time. The outcome of the eventual House votes pose potentially serious political consequences for both parties ahead of the 2020 elections, with Americans deeply divided over whether the president indeed conducted impeachable acts and if it should be up to Congress, or the voters, to decide whether he should remain in office.

The president insists he did nothing wrong and blasts the Democrats' effort daily as a sham and harmful to America. Republican allies seem unwavering in their opposition to expelling Trump, and he claims to be looking ahead to swift acquittal in a Senate trial.

Speaker Nancy Pelosi sounded confident Thursday that Democrats, who once tried to avoid a solely partisan effort, will have the votes to impeach the president without Republican support when the full House votes. But she said it was up to individual lawmakers to weigh the evidence.

"The fact is we take an oath to protect and defend the Constitution of the United States," Pelosi told reporters. "No one is above the law; the president will be held accountable for his abuse of power and for his obstruction of Congress."

After slogging through two days of hearings, Democrats on the committee didn't want to be forced into late-hour voting, a dark-of-night session that could later be used politically against them. As the majority, they wanted to allow Republicans to offer as many amendments and not cut off debate, Democratic aides said. But as the process drew out, Democrats decided they would prefer to pass the articles in the light of day, the aides said.

The president has refused to participate in the proceedings, tweeting criticisms as he did Thursday from the sidelines, mocking the charges against him in the House's nine-page resolution as "impeachment light." But Pelosi said the president was wrong and the case against him is deeply grounded.

Democrats contend that Trump has engaged in a pattern of misconduct toward Russia dating back to the 2016 election campaign that special counsel Robert Mueller investigated. And they say his dealings with Ukraine have benefited its aggressive neighbor Russia, not the U.S., and he must be prevented from "corrupting" U.S. elections again and cheating his way to a second term next year.

"It is urgent," Pelosi said.

But Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said late Thursday on Fox News, "There is zero chance the president will be removed from office." He said he was hoping to have no GOP defections in the Senate trial next year.

The Judiciary Committee session drew out over two days, much of time spent in fights over amendments.

First up was an amendment from GOP Rep. Jim Jordan of Ohio, who tried to delete the first charge against Trump. "This amendment strikes article one because article one ignores the truth," he declared.

Rep. David Cicilline, D-R.I., argued there was "overwhelming evidence" that the president with his lawyer Rudy Giuliani, in pushing Ukraine to investigate rival Biden, was engaged in an abuse of power "to corrupt American elections."

Debate on that one amendment lasted for hours before it was defeated, 23-17, on a party line vote. Others like it followed.

Republicans say Democrats are impeaching the president because they can't beat him in 2020. Democrats warn Americans can't wait for the next election because they worry what Trump will try next.

The House is expected to vote on the articles next week, in the days before Christmas. That would send the impeachment effort to the Senate for a 2020 trial.

Associated Press writers Laurie Kellman, Alan Fram, and Padmananda Rama contributed to this report.

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'Shop early': US Christmas trees supplies tight, prices up

By JOHN RABY Associated Press

CHARLESTON, W.Va. (AP) — Customers searching for the perfect Christmas tree typically glance at Sandy Parsons' limited offerings, then keep walking.

Parsons never got her order for 350 trees from a North Carolina farm. Supplies were short, she was told. Instead, she was shipped some smaller ones for her lot at the Capitol Market in Charleston. Those paled in comparison to the much taller beauties at a competitor's lot next door.

"This has been the worst season," Parsons said. "We lost a lot of money by that. It sets you back two or three years."

Christmas tree supplies are tight again this year across the United States, depending upon location and seller. The industry is still bouncing back from the Great Recession and trying to win people back from a shift toward artificial trees when times were especially tough.

Industry officials say not to worry: Everyone who wants a last-minute tree should be able to find one. It just might take a little more searching, especially if customers want a specific type, and you might have to pay a little more.

The best advice, said Amy Start, executive director of the Michigan Christmas Tree Association, is simple: "Shop early."

Parsons has been in business for 42 years as a seasonal seller of flowers, produce, pumpkins — and this year, just 32 Christmas trees.

"I can tell you how many I didn't buy: 350," said Parsons, whose disappointment has been tempered by robust wreath sales.

In the next lot, Robert Cole was having a jolly ole time preparing an abundance of trees for loading onto customers' vehicles.

The difference? Cole's lot, French Creek Farms of Buckhannon, grows its own trees.

"We've been busier than we've ever been before," Cole said.

Gesturing toward the lots of Parsons and another competitor, he explained his brisk business in the simplest economic terms: "Because there's been no trees here and no trees over there."

An oversupply of trees about a decade ago caused a domino effect nationwide. Subsequently, fewer trees were cut down, which meant not as many seedlings were planted to replace them. Hot, dry weather also took its toll, forcing many growers to close.

Larry Smith, who has been selling Fraser firs from the same lot in Lenoir, North Carolina, for 40 years, and second-generation Christmas tree farmer Mike Rood of Hermann, Missouri, said some farmers' adult children aren't as eager to take over the family business, leading to a labor shortage.

"A lot of the farmers have gotten older and their kids realize there's an easier way to life," Smith said.

Despite such challenges, Smith isn't looking for other ways to make a living.

"I hope they find me fell over dead in the tree patch," he said. "That's the way I really want to go."

Smith's trees have graced homes across the North Carolina foothills and up to the White House. He said he's having his best year ever and doesn't foresee running out. When his supply dwindles, his team heads up the mountain to harvest more.

In Missouri, Rood buys precut trees not native to the state to supplement the short supply. This year, his farm couldn't buy as many taller trees as it wanted.

"The bigger trees in particular at this stage in the game are going to be harder to find," Rood said. "So they need to be aware that if they're really looking for a big tree, they need to go out and find it pretty quickly."

Missouri Christmas Tree Association President Steve Meier said that by late December, "there's still going to be Christmas trees left that haven't been chosen."

The supply issue goes all the way up the chain.

Oregon has the highest annual production of Christmas trees, followed by North Carolina and Michigan. In Oregon, where some tree farms comprise thousands of acres, Kirchem Farm owner Cher Tollefson in Oregon City closed her 100-acre business this holiday season for the first time in nearly three decades,

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citing a lack of trees.

"Our trees need a year to grow," Tollefson said.

The number of Christmas tree farms nationwide fell 3% between 2012 and 2017, the latest year available, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

According to the National Christmas Tree Association, a real tree last year cost \$78 on average, up \$3 from 2017.

At the Charleston market, customer Bob Atkins of Madison noticed not only that prices are higher but "there's not as many as usual."

He was near the point of settling for an artificial tree when he and his wife, Jane, found the right tree after about 20 minutes on Cole's lot.

"I do not want an artificial tree," Jane Atkins said with a smile. "We will fight over that!"

Artificial Christmas trees now represent 70% of all trees in U.S. homes. The Denver-based National Christmas Tree Association is trying to change that, mainly by appealing to a sense of tradition among millennials.

"Young families are our bread and butter," said Doug Hundley, the group's spokesman. "It's important to that group of adults to have that real tree experience."

Associated Press Writers Sarah Blake Morgan in Lenoir, North Carolina, Summer Ballentine in Jefferson City, Missouri, and Mike Householder in Detroit contributed to this report.

Tokyo being billed as 'Recovery Olympics' -- but not for all

By MARI YAMAGUCHI and STEPHEN WADE Associated Press

FUTABA, Japan (AP) — The torch relay for the Tokyo Olympics will kick off in Fukushima, the northern prefecture devastated almost nine years ago by an earthquake, tsunami and the subsequent meltdown of three nuclear reactors.

They'll also play Olympic baseball and softball next year in one part of Fukushima, allowing Tokyo organizers and the Japanese government to label these games the "Recovery Olympics." The symbolism recalls the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, which showcased Japan's reemergence just 19 years after World War II.

But tens of thousands still haven't recovered in Fukushima, displaced by nuclear radiation and unable to return to deserted places like Futaba.

Time stopped in the town of 7,100 when disaster struck on March 11, 2011.

Laundry still hangs from the second floor of one house. Vermin gnaw away at once intimate family spaces, exposed through shattered windows and mangled doors. The desolation is deepened by Japanese tidiness with shoes waiting in doorways for absent owners.

"This recovery Olympics is in name only," Toshihide Yoshida told The Associated Press. He was forced to abandon Futaba and ended up living near Tokyo. "The amount of money spent on the Olympics should have been used for real reconstruction."

Olympic organizers say they are spending \$12.6 billion on the Olympics, about 60% public money. However, an audit report by the national governments says overall spending is about twice that much.

The government has spent 34.6 trillion yen (\$318 billion) for reconstruction projects for the disaster-hit northern prefectures, and the Fukushima plant decommissioning is expected to cost 8 trillion yen (\$73 billion).

The Olympic torch relay will start in March in J-Village, a soccer stadium used as an emergency response hub for Fukushima plant workers. The relay goes to 11 towns hit by the disaster, but bypasses Futaba, a part of Fukushima that Olympic visitors will never see.

"I would like the Olympic torch to pass Futaba to show the rest of the world the reality of our hometown," Yoshida said. "Futaba is far from recovery."

The radiation that spewed from the plant at one point displaced more than 160,000 people. Futaba is the only one of 12 radiation-hit towns that remains a virtual no-go zone. Only daytime visits are allowed

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for decontamination and reconstruction work, or for former residents to check their abandoned homes.

The town has been largely decontaminated and visitors can go almost anywhere without putting on hazmat suits, though they must carry personal dosimeters — which measure radiation absorbed by the body — and surgical masks are recommended. The main train station is set to reopen in March, but residents won't be allowed to return until 2022.

A main-street shopping arcade in Futaba is lined by collapsing store fronts and sits about 4 kilometers (2.5 miles) from the nuclear plant, and 250 kilometers (150 miles) north of Tokyo. One shop missing its front doors advertises Shiseido beauty products with price tags still hanging on merchandise. Gift packages litter the ground.

Futaba Minami Elementary School has been untouched for almost nine years and feels like a mausoleum. No one died in the evacuation. But school bags, textbooks and notebooks sit as they were when nearly 200 children rushed out.

Kids were never allowed to return, and "Friday, March 11," is still written on classroom blackboards along with due dates for the next homework assignment.

On the first floor of the vacant town hall, a human-size "daruma" good-luck figure stands in dim evening light at a reception area. A piece of paper that fell on the floor says the doors must be closed to protect from radiation.

It warns: "Please don't go outside."

The words are underlined in red.

"Let us know if you start feeling unwell," Muneshige Osumi, a former town spokesman told visitors, apologizing for the musty smell and the presence of rats.

About 20,000 people in Japan's northern coastal prefectures died in the magnitude 9.0 earthquake and resulting tsunami. Waves that reached 16 meters (50 feet) killed 21 people around Futaba, shredding a seaside pine forest popular for picnics and bracing swims.

A clock is frozen at 3:37 p.m. atop a white beach house that survived.

Nobody perished from the immediate impact of radiation in Fukushima, but more than 40 elderly patients died after they were forced to travel long hours on buses to out-of-town evacuation centers. Their representatives filed criminal complaints and eventually sent former Tokyo Electric Power Company executives to court. They were acquitted.

When Tokyo was awarded the Olympics in 2013, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe assured International Olympic Committee members that the nuclear disaster was "under control." However, critics say the government's approach to recovery has divided and silenced many people in the disaster-hit zones.

Under a development plan, Futaba hopes to have 2,000 people -- including former residents and newcomers such as construction workers and researchers -- eventually living in a 550-hectare (1,360-acre) site.

Yoshida is unsure if he'll return. But he wants to keep ties to Futaba, where his son inherited a filling station on the main highway connecting northern Japan to Tokyo.

Osumi, the town spokesman, said many former residents have found new homes and jobs and the majority say they won't return. He has his own mixed feelings about going back to his mountainside home in Futaba. The number of residents registered in the town has decreased by more than 1,000 since the accident, indicating they are unlikely to return.

"It was so sad to see the town destroyed and my hometown lost," he said, holding back tears. He reflected on family life, the autumn leaves and the comforting hot baths.

"My heart ached when I had to leave this town behind," he added.

Standing outside the Futaba station, Mayor Shirou Izawa described plans to rebuild a new town. It will be friendly to the elderly, and a place that might become a major hub for research in decommissioning and renewable energy. The hope is that those who come to help in Fukushima's reconstruction may stay and be part of a new Futaba.

"The word Fukushima has become globally known, but regrettably the situation in Futaba or (neighboring) Okuma is hardly known," Izawa said, noting Futaba's recovery won't be ready by the Olympics.

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"But we can still show that a town that was so badly hit has come this far," he added.

To showcase the recovery, government officials say J-Village -- where the torch relays begins -- and the Azuma baseball stadium were decontaminated and cleaned. However, problems keeping popping up at J-Village with radiation "hot spots" being reported, raising questions about safety heading into the Olympics.

The baseball stadium is located about 70 kilometers (45 miles) west of Futaba, J-Village is closer, about 20 kilometers (12 miles) away along the coastal area.

The radioactive waste from decontamination surrounding the plant, and from across Fukushima, is kept in thousands of storage bags stacked up in temporary areas in Futaba and Okuma.

They are to be sorted -- some burned and compacted -- and buried at a medium-term storage facility for the next 30 years. For now they fill vast fields that used to be rice paddies or vegetable farms. One large mound sits next to a graveyard, almost brushing the stone monuments.

This year, 4 million tons of those industrial container bags were to be brought into Futaba, and another million tons to Okuma, where part of the Fukushima plant stands.

Yoshida says the medium-term waste storage sites and the uncertainty over whether they will stay in Futaba or be moved is discouraging residents and newcomers.

"Who wants to come to live in a place like that? Would senior officials in Kasumigaseki government headquarters go and live there?" he asked, referring to the high-end area in Tokyo that houses many government ministries.

"I don't think they would," Yoshida said. "But we have ancestral graves, and we love Futaba, and we don't want Futaba to be lost. The good old Futaba that we remember will be lost forever, but we'll cope."

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

Follow Stephen Wade on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/StephenWadeAP>

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10 Things to Know for Today

By The Associated Press undefined

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

1. BREXIT CLOSER AFTER TORY MAJORITY IN ELECTION Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservative Party wins a decisive majority of seats in Britain's Parliament — an outcome that should pave the way for Brexit to become a reality.

2. 'IT IS NOW VERY LATE AT NIGHT' House Judiciary Chairman Jerrold Nadler abruptly postpones a historic vote on articles of impeachment against President Trump, drawing gasps and incredulity from Republicans.

3. ANOTHER OPIOID CRISIS RAGES Mass abuse of the drug tramadol spans continents, from India to Africa to the Middle East, prompting some countries to ask international authorities to intervene.

4. NEW ZEALAND RECOVERS BODIES FROM VOLCANIC ISLAND Grieving families sing traditional Maori songs as New Zealand military specialists go to White Island to recover six bodies of the 16 people who died in an eruption.

5. DEMOCRATS SHOW CRACKS IN UNITY Elizabeth Warren and Pete Buttigieg are locked in an increasingly acrimonious feud that threatens to change the tone of the Democratic primary.

6. VETS READY TO REMEMBER BATTLE OF THE BULGE Veterans will mix with royalty and dignitaries in Belgium and Luxembourg to commemorate the 75th anniversary of perhaps the greatest battle in U.S. military history.

7. CONGRESS SEEKS FBI SURVEILLANCE CHANGES Lawmakers in both parties say they want changes in the government's surveillance powers after abuses were disclosed in a watchdog's report on the FBI's

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Russia investigation.

8. 'THIS HAS BEEN THE WORST SEASON' With Christmas less than two weeks away, inventory is tight for real Christmas trees across the U.S., especially for procrastinators looking for a certain type of tree.

9. OLIVIA WILDE DEFENDS 'JEWELL' REPORTER ROLE The actress says she does not believe the real-life journalist she plays in the new film "Richard Jewel" "traded sex for tips" despite that insinuation in the movie.

10. RAVENS CLINCH DIVISION TITLE Lamar Jackson further makes his case for NFL MVP after throwing five touchdown passes and Baltimore clinches the AFC North by beating the New York Jets 42-21.

'Nuts!' US troops thwarted Hitler's last gamble 75 years ago

By RAF CASERT Associated Press

BASTOGNE, Belgium (AP) — Pvt. Arthur Jacobson was seeking cover in the snow behind a tank moving slowly through the wooded hills of Belgium's Ardennes, German bullets whizzing by.

That was when he lost his best friend and Bazooka team partner to sniper fire. "They couldn't hit him, he shouted," Jacobson said wistfully. "Those were his last words."

The recollection of his worst day in the Battle of the Bulge still haunts him, three quarters of a century later during the first return of the 95-year-old to the battlefield.

And at a time when U.S. President Donald Trump is fanning the flames of trans-Atlantic discord, the pristine-white rows of thousands of grave markers over the remains of U.S. soldiers in cemeteries on the former front line hark back to the days when Americans made the ultimate sacrifice for a cause across the ocean.

The fighting in the bitterly cold winter of 1944 was unforgiving to the extreme.

What Jacobson didn't know then was that he was part of the battle to contain Nazi Germany's desperate last offensive that Adolf Hitler hoped would become his version of the Allies' D-Day: A momentous thrust that would change the course of World War II by forcing U.S. and British troops to sue for peace, thus freeing Germany to focus on rapidly advancing Soviet armies in the east.

"WE WERE THERE TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT"

The Battle of the Bulge "is arguably the greatest battle in American military history," according to the U.S. army historical center. Such perspective came only later to Jacobson, who was barely 20 at the time.

"They really didn't tell us anything," he said. "The Germans had attacked through Belgium, and we were there to do something about it."

Out of the blue at dawn on Dec. 16, 1944, over 200,000 German troops counter-attacked across the front line in Belgium and Luxembourg, smashing into battle-weary US soldiers positioned in terrain as foreign to them as it was familiar to the Germans.

Yet somehow, the Americans blunted the advance and started turning back the enemy for good, setting allied troops on a roll that would end the war in Europe less than five months later.

This battle gained fame not so much for the commanders' tactics as for the resilience of small units hampered by poor communications that stood shoulder to shoulder to deny Hitler the quick breakthrough he desperately needed. Even though the Americans were often pushed back, they were able to delay the German advance in its crucial initial stages. The tipping point was to come later.

All weekend, a handful of returning veterans like Jacobson will be feted by an ever grateful local population for their bravery. Royalty, dignitaries and some government leaders will gather in Bastogne, Belgium and Hamm, Luxembourg, on Monday to remember the battle itself. "It will be a great day," said Belgian Vice Premier Koen Geens. Remembering both the German forces, driven on by Hitler's hated SS troops, and the allied soldiers, he said: "We are capable of the worst and of the best."

"I DON'T NEED A NECKTIE"

Overall, deaths in the month-long battle are estimated in the five digits. The Americans suffered at least 80,000 casualties including more than 10,000 dead, while up to 12,000 were listed killed among some 100,000 German casualties.

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Among the fallen was Albert W. Duffer, Jacobson's Bazooka team partner, shot in the neck by a German sniper on Jan. 6, 1945. Last Tuesday Jacobson went to greet Duffer for the first time in 75 years — at the Henri Chapelle U.S. cemetery in the northern part of the battle zone, where 7,987 U.S. soldiers lie buried. At dusk, Jacobson watched the U.S. flag being lowered and was presented with it in recognition of his valor.

The Battle of the Bulge was one of the war's least predictable campaigns. After D-Day and the draining Normandy drive, allied troops sweeping across the continent believed the worst was behind them.

Paris had been liberated, Gen. George Patton was moving eastwards toward Germany, and Hitler had to keep an increasingly bleary eye on Stalin's Soviet armies advancing on the Eastern Front.

"The thought was that Germany was on its knees and could no longer raise a big army," said Mathieu Billa, director of the Bastogne War Museum.

Still, Hitler believed Germany could turn the tide, and centered on regaining the northern Belgian port of Antwerp with a push through the sparsely populated Ardennes.

The 120-mile (170 kilometer) dash seemed so fanciful that few of Hitler's own generals believed in it, let alone the allied command. Allied intelligence heard something might be afoot, but even on the eve of the attack the U.S. VIII Corps daily note said that "There is nothing to report."

For days to follow, the only reports would be bad for U.S. troops retreating amid word that SS troops were executing their prisoners — like at Malmedy, where 80 surrendered soldiers were murdered in a frozen field.

When Jacobson moved into the Ardennes, night temperatures outdoors dropped as low as -20 Celsius (-4 Fahrenheit). "You had to dance around not to freeze to death," he said. Daytime saw the constant fear of sniper fire.

Back home in the States, some were oblivious to the soldiers' plight. "My family sent me a necktie," Jacobson chuckled. "I sent a letter back: 'I don't need a necktie.'"

"NUTS!"

Soon though, the German effort pushed its limits as Antwerp remained well out of reach and troops ran out of ammunition, morale and, crucially, fuel. Even the weather turned against the Germans, as the skies finally cleared, allowing the all-powerful allied air force to pound the enemy.

Nowhere was that tipping point more visible than in the southern Ardennes town of Bastogne, where surrounded U.S. troops were cut off for days with little ammunition or food.

When Brig. Gen. Anthony C. McAuliffe of the 101st Airborne received a Dec. 22 ultimatum to surrender or face total destruction, he offered one of the most famous — and brief — replies in military history: "Nuts."

Four days later, Patton's troops broke the encirclement. And so it went with the Battle of the Bulge too, with the U.S. troops gaining momentum after Christmas.

After the fighting ended on 28 January 1945, Allied forces invaded Germany, eventually leading to the Nazi surrender and the end of the war in Europe.

Jacobson, who lives in Port St. Lucie, Florida, also entered Germany. But his war was ended by a March 2 mortar blast, which seriously injured his leg and killed three other soldiers.

After eight months of front-line horror, hospital offered him a kind of deliverance despite the pain.

"I used to wake up at night in the hospital. I'd dream about having to move out at night," he said. "Orders would come down, 'let's move out to another position.' And I'd wake up," he said, "and look around and see where I was and then smile to myself and go back to sleep."

AP photojournalist Virginia Mayo and videojournalist Mark Carlson contributed to this story

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China says trade deal with US must be 'mutually beneficial'

By JOE McDONALD and PAUL WISEMAN AP Business Writers

BEIJING (AP) — Expectations for a U.S.-Chinese trade truce rose Friday, though Beijing accused Washington of unfairly attacking its economy and said a settlement to their costly, 17-month-old conflict must be "mutually beneficial."

A senior Trump administration official said an announcement regarding China would take place Friday. The official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss internal planning.

A "deal is close," said Myron Brilliant, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's head of international affairs, who was briefed by both sides.

Brilliant said the Trump administration agreed to suspend a planned tariff increase on \$160 billion of Chinese imports due to take effect Sunday and to reduce existing tariffs, though it wasn't clear by how much.

In return, Beijing would buy more U.S. farm products, increase Americans companies' access to the Chinese market and tighten protection for intellectual property rights.

The interim "Phase 1" deal, which doesn't appear to cover major U.S.-Chinese disputes, awaits final approval from President Donald Trump. Trump did not comment to reporters on the talks late Thursday when returning to the White House.

Trump declared on Twitter early Thursday: "Getting VERY close to a BIG DEAL with China. They want it, and so do we!"

Chinese officials gave no confirmation of a possible deal in comments that highlighted how far apart the two sides still are. There is no indication the "Phase 1" agreement extends to major disputes including U.S. complaints Beijing steals or pressures companies to hand over technology.

"Negotiations must be based on the principles of equality and mutual respect," said a foreign ministry spokeswoman, Hua Chunying, repeating Beijing's long-held position. "The deal must be mutually beneficial, a win-win."

Meanwhile, Foreign Minister Wang Yi complained at a separate government-organized forum in Beijing that Washington is unfairly attacking China.

"The U.S. side has successively imposed unjustified restrictions and crackdowns on China in economy and trade, science and technology and personnel exchanges," Wang said. "As far as China is concerned, what we are pursuing is our justified rights of development."

Trump's comments triggered a rally on Wall Street that carried over to Asian trading.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average surged 220 points, or 0.8% on Thursday. In Friday trading, Japan's Nikkei 225 index jumped 2.6% while the Shanghai Composite index advanced 1.5%.

Beijing has threatened to retaliate if Sunday's tariff hike goes ahead.

Trump announced the "Phase 1" agreement following talks in Washington in October but neither side has disclosed details.

Three Democratic senators — Minority Leader Charles Schumer of New York, Ron Wyden of Oregon and Sherrod Brown of Ohio — sent a letter to the White House on Thursday, urging Trump to "stand firm" in the negotiations with China. They called on the president to hold out for "commitments from the Chinese government to enact substantive, enforceable and permanent structural reform."

The administration accuses Beijing of cheating in its drive to develop advanced technologies as driverless cars and artificial intelligence.

The administration alleges — and independent analysts generally agree — that China steals technology, forces foreign companies to hand over trade secrets, unfairly subsidizes its own firms and throws up bureaucratic hurdles for foreign rivals.

Beijing rejects the accusations and contends that Washington is simply trying to suppress a rising competitor in international trade.

Despite the plans for an announcement, it's not a done deal, noted Jeffrey Halley of Oanda.

"After such an interminable wait and having being led to water before, I would like to see something official in writing officially. Further to that point, although the in-principle agreement may have been agreed,

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the legally binding text has yet to be drawn up," he said.

Since July 2018, the Trump administration has imposed import taxes on \$360 billion in Chinese products. Beijing has retaliated by taxing \$120 billion in U.S. exports, including soybeans and other farm products that are vital to many of Trump's supporters in rural America.

On Sunday, the administration was set to start taxing an additional \$160 billion in Chinese imports, a move that would extend the sanctions to just about everything China ships to the United States.

Repeated rounds of negotiations had failed to achieve even a preliminary agreement. The prolonged uncertainty over Trump's trade policies has curtailed U.S. business investment and likely held back economic growth. Many corporations have slowed or suspended investment plans until they know when, how or even whether the trade standoff will end.

A far-reaching agreement on China's technology policies will likely prove difficult. It would require Beijing to scale back its drive to become a global powerhouse in industrial high technology, something it sees as a path to prosperity and international influence.

Efforts to acquire foreign technology are a theme that runs through Chinese law and government. Security researchers have asserted that Beijing operates a network of research institutes and business parks to turn stolen foreign technology into commercial products.

The Trump administration has been seeking a way to enforce any significant trade agreement with China, reflecting its contention that Beijing has violated past promises. One way to do is to retain some tariffs as leverage.

Wiseman reported from Washington. Associated Press Writer Darlene Superville in Washington contributed.

New Zealand recovers 6 bodies from toxic volcanic island

By MARK BAKER and STEVE McMORRAN Associated Press

WHAKATANE, New Zealand (AP) — As grieving families sang traditional Maori songs, New Zealand military specialists wearing protective gear landed on a small volcanic island on Friday and recovered six bodies of the 16 people who died in an eruption four days earlier.

The specialists — six men and two women wearing hooded protective suits and using breathing gear — landed by helicopter on White Island and found six of the eight bodies thought to be there.

"We know that reunification won't ease that sense of loss or grief because I don't think anything can. But we felt an enormous duty of care as New Zealanders to make sure that we brought their family members back," Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said at a news conference.

The families cheered and expressed joy and relief upon being told of the successful recovery, Police Deputy Commissioner Wally Haumaha said. "They've got their loved ones coming home," Haumaha said.

The bodies were airlifted to a nearby ship where the risky operation was monitored. Toxic volcanic gases are still venting from the crater, and scientists say another eruption like the fatal one Monday is possible.

The bodies were to be taken to Auckland for identification. They are thought to be Australians, who were most of the visitors to the island on Monday when the volcano erupted.

Another recovery operation was planned for the last two bodies, thought to be New Zealanders, a tour guide and a boat captain who had taken tourists to the island.

Police said divers searched the sea around the island briefly in the afternoon before weather conditions forced them to stop for the day. Aerial surveillance was also used to try to locate the two bodies.

"We do believe that at least one of them is in the water and the other one we are unsure," but the body may be in the sea as well, Police Commissioner Mike Bush said at a news briefing. "We will continue to search for these people," he added.

Conditions on land were good for Friday's recovery operation and the volcano was "quiet" as the team worked, Police Deputy Commissioner Mike Clement said.

Scientists have warned that White Island, which is the exposed tip of a mostly undersea volcano, is

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"highly volatile," and has been venting steam and mud regularly.

The eruption Monday occurred as 47 tourists and their guides were exploring the island. Many of the survivors were severely burned.

Counties-Manukau Health chief medical officer Dr. Peter Watson said 15 people are in burns units at various New Zealand hospitals, including 11 whose conditions are "very critical." All 13 Australians who suffered burns have been returned to Australia, he said.

Specialist medical teams were heading to New Zealand from Australia, Britain and the United States. Skin banks were also sending tissue to New Zealand hospitals to use for grafts.

Authorities say 24 Australians, nine Americans, five New Zealanders, four Germans, two Britons, two Chinese and a Malaysian were on the island at the time. Many were from a Royal Caribbean cruise ship that had left Sydney two days earlier.

McMorran reported from Wellington, New Zealand.

Hong Kong police slip on banana peel with tear gas tweet

By JOHN LEICESTER Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — Hong Kong's much-maligned police force has slipped on a banana peel by trying to make light of its liberal use of tear gas during the territory's protest movement.

Mimicking an artist who duct-taped a banana to a wall, the force tweeted a photo of a canister similarly taped, with the words: "Say NO to violence. Let's leave the tear gas cartridge on the wall forever."

"For a Police officer, using force, including tear gas, is always the last resort. If rioters don't use violence, Hong Kong will be safe and there's no reason for us to use force," the post on its Twitter account said.

Respondents to the post called it crass. Some, in turn, posted videos of Hong Kong police officers' use of gas and other riot control measures, which protesters say have been excessively violent.

The police force has fired nearly 16,000 tear gas rounds and made more than 6,000 arrests during the six months of pro-democracy demonstrations that have at times been marked by violent clashes and vandalism of government buildings, transit hubs and commercial spaces.

The protesters' demands include an independent investigation of police actions, amnesty for protesters who have been arrested and retraction of the description of protesters as "rioters." They say the label characterizes peaceful demonstrators as criminals who could face long imprisonments.

Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam has refused to meet those demands, saying a police investigation is sufficient and that dropping criminal cases against the protesters would not follow the rule of law.

The police watchdog agency that is investigating suffered a blow this week when foreign experts it recruited to bolster the credibility of its work quit, saying its probe lacked the powers and tools it needs.

The police force's make-light tweet about tear gas initially included a "Bananaart" hashtag, but that was then deleted. The force then reposted its tweet without it.

The hashtag referred to a talked-about artwork from artist Maurizio Cattelan that stole the show at Art Basel Miami. Titled "Comedian," it was a spotty banana duct-taped to a wall.

Policing the protests has stretched the force's resources. The government said in a briefing paper for a legislative meeting Friday that the bill for police overtime from June, when the mass demonstrations began, to November was about 950 million Hong Kong dollars (US\$122 million).

"More than 900 protests, processions and public meetings have been staged in Hong Kong, many of which eventually turned into illegal acts of violence," the government note said. "During the ongoing conflicts in the past few months, frontline police officers had to handle massive and unlawful violent acts in various districts on the one hand, and to maintain regular police duties and public services in the territory on the other."

From punchline to political star: the rise of Boris Johnson

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Boris Johnson's many critics have often dismissed him as a political clown. He's having the last laugh now.

Results Friday confirmed that Johnson's Conservative Party has won a thumping majority in Britain's general election. He looks set to take more seats in Parliament than any Conservative leader since Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s.

A majority government gives Johnson the power to fulfill his promise to take Britain out of the European Union next month.

It's a triumph for a 55-year-old politician who has been written off more than once.

Johnson has built a career playing the ruffled, Latin-spouting clown who doesn't take himself too seriously. He once said he had as much chance of becoming prime minister as of being "reincarnated as an olive."

"He doesn't seem like an ordinary politician," said Jonathan Hopkin, a political scientist at the London School of Economics. "He has managed to create this aura around himself of being a personality, an eccentric, somebody who is funny and can kind of appeal to people beyond the usual party divides."

That bumbling exterior masks a steel core of ambition.

As a child, Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson's goal was to become "world king." At the elite private school Eton he was clever, though not diligent; one teacher complained to Johnson's parents about his "disgracefully cavalier attitude."

At Oxford University, Johnson was president of the Oxford Union debating society, and a member of the Bullingdon Club, a posh, raucous drinking-and-dining society notorious for drunken vandalism.

As a young journalist for The Daily Telegraph in Brussels, he delighted his editors with exaggerated stories of European Union waste and ridiculous red tape — tales that had an enduring political impact in Britain.

Johnson spent the following decades juggling journalism and politics, downplaying his personal ambition while becoming steadily more famous. He was a magazine editor, a backbench lawmaker, a self-satirizing guest on TV comedy quiz shows. In 2008, he was elected mayor of London, serving until 2016.

His path wasn't smooth. Johnson was fired from The Times for fabricating a quote. He was recorded promising to give a friend the address of a journalist that the friend wanted beaten up. He was fired from a senior Conservative post for lying about an extramarital affair. He always bounced back.

His words often landed him in trouble. Johnson has called Papua New Guineans cannibals, called the children of single mothers "ignorant, aggressive and illegitimate" and compared Muslim women who wear face-covering veils to "letter boxes."

Confronted with past language, Johnson has claimed he was joking, or accused journalists of distorting his words and raking up long-ago articles. Critics allege that his quips are not gaffes, but deliberate dog-whistles to bigots — a populist tactic straight out of the Donald Trump playbook.

Enemies and allies alike have long wondered what Johnson really believes. Before Britain's 2016 referendum he wrote two newspaper columns — one in favor of quitting the EU, one for remaining — before throwing himself behind the "leave" campaign.

His energy and popular appeal helped the "leave" side win. Critics say the campaign was built on lies, such as the false claim, emblazoned on the side of a bus, that Britain sends 350 million pounds (\$460 million) a week to the EU, money that could instead be spent on the U.K.'s health service.

After the referendum, Johnson was made foreign secretary by Prime Minister Theresa May, one of the top jobs in government. Two years later he quit in opposition to her Brexit blueprint, then won a Conservative leadership contest in July 2019 when May resigned in defeat after Parliament stymied her plan.

To get the top job, Johnson promised Conservatives that he'd rather be "dead in a ditch" than delay Brexit beyond Oct. 31.

But his first three months in office were studded with defeats: He suspended Parliament to sideline troublesome lawmakers, but the U.K. Supreme Court ruled the move illegal. Parliament rejected his attempt

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to push through this Brexit bill and forced him to ask the EU for more time. The “do or die” date of Oct. 31 came and went, and Johnson gambled on an election in hopes of securing a majority and a mandate.

It was risky, but it paid off.

Despite his reputation as a shambolic politician, the Conservative campaign was disciplined and focused, hammering home the “Get Brexit done” message. Johnson was criticized for avoiding tough interviews as the party tried to steer clear of potential gaffes.

The strategy worked. Johnson is now on course to take the U.K. out of the bloc by Jan. 31.

Yet “Get Brexit Done” is a misleading slogan. Leaving the EU will only kick-start months of negotiations on future trade relations with the bloc, with the current deadline set for the end of 2020.

“Brexit will happen on Jan. 31,” said Tony Travers, professor of government at the London School of Economics. “And then the question is: Can some kind of trade deal be done with the EU by Dec. 31, 2020?”

Follow AP’s full coverage of Brexit and British politics at: <https://www.apnews.com/Brexit>

Former NBA Commissioner Stern has emergency brain surgery

By **BRIAN MAHONEY AP Basketball Writer**

NEW YORK (AP) — Former NBA Commissioner David Stern suffered a sudden brain hemorrhage Thursday and had emergency surgery.

The league made the announcement about Stern’s condition in a statement, saying its thoughts and prayers were with the 77-year-old Stern’s family.

Stern served exactly 30 years as the NBA’s longest-tenured commissioner before Adam Silver replaced him on Feb. 1, 2014. Stern has remained affiliated with the league with the title of commissioner emeritus and has remained active in his other interests, such as sports technology.

Stern oversaw the growth of the NBA into a league whose games were televised in more than 200 countries and territories and in more than 40 languages. The league was staging a regular-season game in Mexico City between Dallas and Detroit on Thursday night when it revealed the news about Stern.

People in and around the league offered prayers of support for Stern, with Hall of Famer Magic Johnson tweeting that he and wife Cookie were praying “for my good friend who helped save my life.”

Johnson announced he was retiring because of HIV in 1991 but returned the following year at the All-Star Game with Stern’s backing, Johnson would later return to the league with Stern’s support, even while some players were concerned about playing against him for health reasons.

Stern stayed busy after stepping down as commissioner, taking trips overseas on the league’s behalf, doing public speaking and consulting. He was inducted to the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame in 2014.

Stern oversaw the addition of seven franchises and the creation of the WNBA and NBA Development League, now called the G League — which will have a franchise in Mexico starting with the 2020-21 season. Stern had a hand in numerous initiatives that changed the league, including drug testing, the salary cap and implementation of a dress code.

He wouldn’t even let staffers use the word “retire” when he left his office, because he never intended to stop working. He has kept an office in New York and regularly travels into the city for work on the projects he pursued once he turned the league over to Silver.

Russia probe report spurs calls for FBI surveillance changes

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Revelations that the FBI committed serious errors in wiretapping a former Trump campaign aide have spurred bipartisan calls for change to the government's surveillance powers, including from some Republicans who in the past have voted to renew or expand those authorities.

Anger over the errors cited in this week's Justice Department's inspector general's report of the Russia investigation has produced rare consensus from Democrats and Republicans who otherwise have had sharply different interpretations of the report's findings. The inspector general said the FBI was justified in investigating ties between the campaign and Russia, but criticized how the investigation was conducted.

The report cited flaws and omissions in the government's warrant applications under the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, documenting problems with a surveillance program that Democrats and civil libertarians have long maintained is opaque, intrusive and operates with minimal oversight. They've now been joined by Republicans who are irate that FBI officials did not supply key information to judges when they applied to eavesdrop on former Trump aide Carter Page.

"I'm still trying to get my arms around the proposition that a whole bunch of conservative Republicans who've logged years blocking bipartisan FISA reforms are now somehow privacy hawks," said Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore.

It's unclear what steps, if any, Congress could or will take to rein in the FBI's power under the surveillance law, and it remains to be seen whether outrage over the way a Trump ally was treated will extend to less overtly political investigations.

Inspector General Michael Horowitz, who has recommended changes, said his office will conduct an audit of how the FBI applies for warrants from the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court. FBI Director Christopher Wray said the bureau is making its own changes to ensure more accuracy and completeness in warrant applications. That includes tightening up layers of review and record-keeping.

"I think we're entrusted with very significant power and authority. The FISA statute provides the FBI with absolutely indispensable tools that keep 325 million Americans safe everyday," Wray told The Associated Press on Monday. "But with that significant power and authority comes a responsibility to be scrupulously accurate and careful, and I think that's what the FBI does best."

The 1978 law authorizes the FBI to monitor the communications of people on U.S. soil they suspect of being agents of a foreign power, such as potential terrorists or spies. Unlike criminal wiretaps, the FBI need not have probable cause that a crime was committed to obtain a warrant. In Page's case, officials suspected that he was being targeted for Russian government recruitment though he was never accused by the FBI of wrongdoing.

Last year, the House Intelligence Committee gave the public an unprecedented peek into the secret process as it released dueling memos about the Page warrant, part of the partisan dispute over special counsel Robert Mueller's Russia investigation.

Most of the surveillance applications do not result in criminal charges. When they do, there's no presumed right for a defendant to see the document themselves. Judges can order prosecutors to share FISA information with defendants if they deem it necessary for challenging a search's legality, but courts consistently have said disclosing the material could expose intelligence secrets.

"The absolute lack of any potential for adversarial testing at any point in the process creates an environment where sloppiness and corner-cutting is so much more likely," said Elizabeth Goitein, who co-directs the Brennan Center for Justice's Liberty and National Security Program.

Another criticism of the surveillance court has been that it's seen as a virtual rubber-stamp for government requests, with almost all applications approved. Justice Department documents show the government filed 1,081 applications requesting electronic surveillance under FISA in 2018. One was withdrawn and only one other was rejected in full.

The requests to wiretap Page, originally made in the fall of 2016 and then renewed three times after that, included what the inspector general said were 17 flaws and omissions.

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According to Horowitz, the FBI failed to update the court as it learned new information that could have undercut some of the original assertions it made about Page. Agents, for instance, did not disclose that questions had been raised about the reliability of a source whose reporting had been relied on in obtaining the warrant, nor that a Trump campaign aide had denied to an informant that anyone in the campaign was coordinating with Russia.

Those omissions are problematic, though not necessarily surprising, Goitein said.

"Investigators become wedded to their theories of the case and invested in the success of their investigations," she said.

For Republican senators, even self-proclaimed hawkish ones who supported FISA as a powerful counterterrorism tool in a post-9/11 era, the problems detailed by Horowitz were enough for them to demand change.

Sen. Lindsey Graham, chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, invoked the specter of J. Edgar Hoover, the longest-serving FBI director whose tenure included repeated civil liberties abuses.

"I'd hate to lose the ability of the FISA court to operate at a time probably when we need it the most," Graham, R-S.C., told Horowitz. "But after your report, I have serious concerns about whether the FISA court can continue unless there is fundamental reform."

Sen. Mike Lee, R-Utah, said he had warned for years that the FISA statute was ripe for abuse and that "it's not a question of if, but it's when and how soon will government officials get caught doing it."

Wyden said he would like to see new alliances.

"I've always felt that security and liberty are not mutually exclusive — that smart policies get you more of both and not so-so-smart policies get you less of both," he added.

Follow Eric Tucker on Twitter at <http://www.twitter.com/etuckerAP>

Preservation or development? Brazil's Amazon at a crossroads

DAVID BILLER and LEO CORREA Associated Press

TRAIRAO, Brazil (AP) — Night falls in Brazil's Amazon and two logging trucks without license plates emerge from the jungle. They rumble over dirt roads that lead away from a national forest, carrying trunks of trees hundreds of years old.

After pulling onto a darkened highway, the truckers chug to their turnoff into the woods, where they deliver their ancient cargo. By morning, the trunks are laid out for hewing at the remote sawmill, its corrugated metal roof hardly visible from the highway.

The highway known as BR-163 stretches from soybean fields to a riverside export terminal. The loggers were just south of the road's juncture with BR-230, known as the Trans-Amazon. Together the highways cover more than 5,000 miles, crossing the world's fifth-biggest country in the state of Para.

Carved through jungle during Brazil's military dictatorship in the 1970s, the roads were built to bend nature to man's will in the vast hinterland. Four decades later, there's development taking shape, but also worsening deforestation — and locals harbor concerns that progress may pass them by.

COLONIZATION DREAM

The highways first meet in the city of Ruropolis, where the military government promised land to lure people to the planned agricultural village. One 53-year-old man, Hilquias Soares, remembers a state agent in his hometown yelling, "Who wants to go to Para?"

His family took the chance, arriving just after President Emílio Médici, a general, inaugurated the town. Archival footage shows Médici unveiling a plaque reading: "The Brazilian people respond to the challenge of history, occupying the heart of the Amazon." Children play on see-saws and show off T-shirts with the crossroads sprawling across the continent-sized nation.

"There was a dream of colonization, of getting land and seeing if here we could have better financial conditions," Dedé Diniz, 69, said in his home. "A lot of people don't recognize what we did, what we fought for."

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Diniz examines a photograph he took of Médiçi and, below it in his album, a shot of a truck trapped in mud. It's nothing like the bucolic painting on his wall that shows farm furrows and wild forest beside the highway, where a machine repairs ruts.

He jokes that he'll update the painting with asphalt soon — that stretch should be paved by 2021. Already people have started moving in from other states to buy land for cattle pastures.

Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro, a former Army captain, won last year's election with support from farmers, truckers and miners by resurrecting the dictatorship-era desire to develop the world's largest tropical rainforest. But he did so at a different stage of human history, one where scientists recognize the Amazon must remain to suck carbon from the air and help arrest climate change. Some also argue the Amazon, which has lost some 20% of its original forest, is nearing an irreversible tipping point. In that sense, Brazil itself is at a crossroads.

ROAD WARRIORS

From Ruropolis, the Trans-Amazon and BR-163 run jointly westward over a bumpy 70 miles before splitting at a little roundabout. During corn and soy harvests, 2,600 trucks pass through each day to and from the nearby Tapajos River.

There, trucks pull into transshipment ports. Grain cascades from their containers to be loaded onto barges. After a downriver trip that takes days, the grain is poured into ships' holds and dispatched across the world, largely to China.

That transoceanic network seems far removed from the road warriors filling up on grilled beef or bowls of açai in truck stops. While the truckers eat, grease-stained mechanics replace worn-out shocks and blown-out tires.

At the start of Bolsonaro's administration, only 32 miles of BR-163 from soy country to the Trans-Amazon remained to be paved. But tropical rains transformed the dirt into impassable mud. Soy trucker Sandro Vieira recalled being stuck in gridlock two years ago, consuming nothing but bread, coffee and peanuts for a week; to this day, the smell of peanuts disgusts him.

Bolsonaro's government last month finished paving the soy corridor. The decades-delayed achievement is the first of major public works to come, Infrastructure Minister Tarcísio de Freitas said. They include a \$3 billion grain railway alongside BR-163.

A ministry promotional video for foreign investors shows deer and other wild animals in their habitats, living in harmony with highways.

"We know Brazil has a responsibility to the world, and we will fulfill our responsibility," de Freitas said.

IMPROVED ACCESS

The two highways opened up the rainforest — and viewed from above, the landscape is slashed by jagged stitches of cleared forest on both sides.

Roads themselves aren't the problem today, according to Paulo Barreto, a forest engineer and researcher at environmental group Imazon.

The issue, he said, is that improved access has been accompanied by Bolsonaro's rhetoric emboldening illegal loggers while his administration undermines its own environmental regulator.

"If those things continue, deforestation will explode in the area," Barreto said.

Official data show Amazon deforestation rose almost 30% in the 12 months through July, to its worst level in 11 years. Para state alone accounted for 40% of the loss, with a heat map of incidents running along the Trans-Amazon and BR-163. The Jamanxim national forest, alongside BR-163, had the second most deforestation of any protected area.

Paulo Bezerra, a leader of the Munduruku indigenous people that live around the highways, said in an interview that farmers from Mato Grosso and other states are using tractors to rip down trees near his village, and try to intimidate tribesmen into silence. They say they're afraid of being killed.

After the global spotlight turned to Brazil in August as the Amazon burned, Bolsonaro dismissed the huge fires as normal practice for clearing pasture and farmland.

What kind of development should Brazil's government encourage, and how much, are questions being

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asked at the U.N.'s ongoing climate conference in Madrid.

Environment Minister Ricardo Salles said in an interview in Madrid that people in the Amazon will continue to be drawn into illegal activities if there isn't economic development.

SOY BONANZA

Paving BR-163 ensures soy and corn can flow uninterrupted, making viable more farming and new riverside terminals, where the government says exports can reach 25 million tons in 2024, from 10 million tons this year.

More soy means more transport. Workers recently spread concrete at one gas station being built near the crossroads, with parking for 760 trucks.

Edeon Ferreira, executive director of soy and corn transport group Pró-Logística, said heavier traffic will add jobs at restaurants and hotels, plus generate demand for mechanics to meet truckers' needs. He spoke while leading a group of Mato Grosso soy farmers on a 2,900-mile circuit to inspect Amazon roadways.

Ferreira said Mato Grosso can farm enough on degraded pasture, without deforestation, as cattle ranching becomes efficient. But Imazon's Barreto said productivity gains don't happen automatically; farmers will calculate whether it's cheaper to invest in technology or clear forest areas made available, even tacitly, by the government.

To support Amazon states, Salles said Brazil aims to shore up foreign funding from the Paris Agreement. But Brazilian officials have yet to detail measures, goals or resources for anti-deforestation efforts.

The clock is ticking. Already the Amazon is growing warmer and drier, losing its capacity to recycle water, and the majority may become savannah in 15 to 30 years, said Carlos Nobre, a climate scientist at the University of Sao Paulo.

ORDER AND PROGRESS

Over the past two decades, soy was increasingly planted along the northern part of BR-163. On one side of the highway is the Tapajos national forest, and farmland on the other. Fires burn here and there. In one spot, the breeze carries black ash across the road into the protected area.

"The national forest is a reserve that's important for the country, for the world," said Manoel de Souza, 59, who coordinates the Tapajos forest's federation of traditional communities. "Soy is also important, but it should be ordered so that they aren't on top of one another, impacting each other."

Just north of the forest is Belterra, which was jungle throughout João Ferreira's childhood. Today, his plot is an island of shade and birdsong in the middle of sweeping plantations. He's known as João of Honey, though none of his 1,000 beehives remain. The bees died off since agribusiness moved in 20 years ago, said João, 59.

He complains that agribusiness did away with native forest, and its efficient machinery creates few jobs, leaving townspeople in the lurch. In an act of lonesome protest, he painted altered versions of the Brazilian flag and hung them over his yard. They feature question marks rather than the national motto "Order and Progress," because he's not sure Brazil has them any longer.

"One day progress comes," he said, "and decay arrives with it."

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AP producer Dorothee Thiesing contributed reporting from Madrid

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10 ex-NFL players charged with defrauding healthcare program

By MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Ten former NFL players were charged in a multimillion-dollar scheme to defraud the league's health care benefit program by submitting false claims for medical equipment, including devices used on horses, the Justice Department said Thursday.

The players were charged in two separate indictments filed in federal court in Kentucky, accusing them of conspiracy, wire fraud and healthcare fraud. Prosecutors allege they submitted nearly \$4 million in phony claims, leading to payouts of about \$3.4 million between June 2017 and December 2018.

Those charged include five former players on the Washington Redskins, including Clinton Portis and Carlos Rogers.

Prosecutors allege the players targeted the Gene Upshaw NFL Player Health Reimbursement Account Plan, which was established as part of a collective bargaining agreement in 2006. It provides tax-free reimbursement of out-of-pocket medical care expenses that were not covered by insurance and that were incurred by former players, their spouses and dependents.

"As outlined in the indictments, a group of former players brazenly defrauded the plan by seeking reimbursements for expensive medical equipment that they never purchased," said Assistant Attorney General Brian Benczkowski, who leads the Justice Department's criminal division.

The players claimed to have purchased hyperbaric oxygen chambers, ultrasound machines and electromagnetic therapy devices that were designed to be used on horses, he said.

Prosecutors say the group's alleged ringleaders, Robert McCune and Correll Buckhalter — who they allege broke off to create his own similar ring — would recruit former players by offering to submit fake claims to the health care plan. The ringleaders would then demand thousands of dollars in kickbacks for each fake claim, prosecutors allege.

The suspects are accused of fabricating letters from health care providers about using the medical equipment, fabricating prescriptions that were purportedly signed by healthcare providers and creating fake invoices from medical equipment companies in an effort to prove the equipment was purchased, according to court documents. In reality, they had never purchased or received the medical equipment, prosecutors said.

Investigators believe the defendants had forged the prescriptions and authorization letters and uncovered no evidence that any doctors were complicit in the scheme, Benczkowski said.

After the phony claims were submitted, the former players would receive reimbursement checks and pay a kickback to the ringleaders and recruiters, the indictments charge.

Prosecutors moved to bring charges, in part because the scheme put the health care plan's tax-exempt status at risk, which could've forced other former players using the plan legitimately to pay more, Benczkowski said.

Four of the suspects, McCune, Rogers, John Eubanks and Ceandris Brown, were arrested Thursday morning by the FBI. Six others had agreed to surrender to authorities, the Justice Department said. They are: James Butler, Fredrick Bennett, Etric Pruitt, Tamarick Vanover, Portis and Buckhalter.

The Justice Department has also filed court papers in Kentucky noting that it plans to file charges against two other players as well, including Joe Horn, a four-time Pro Bowl wide receiver for the New Orleans Saints, and Donald "Reche" Caldwell.

The investigation was continuing, but because the plan involves only former players prosecutors do not expect any current NFL players to face charges, Benczkowski said.

Portis' lawyer, Mark Dycio, said his client "had no knowledge that his participation in what he believed to be an NFL sanctioned medical reimbursement insurance program was illegal."

"He is completely taken aback by the indictment and will move forward with the process of clearing his good name and those of his fellow NFL alumni," Dycio said.

New Zealand recovers 6 bodies days after volcanic eruption

By MARK BAKER Associated Press

WHAKATANE, New Zealand (AP) — New Zealand military specialists recovered six bodies from a small volcanic island Friday days after an eruption claimed at least eight other lives and left a toxic and volatile landscape.

The eight specialists wearing protective clothing and using breathing apparatuses landed by helicopter and found six of the bodies thought to remain on White Island since the eruption Monday. The bodies were airlifted to a ship near the island off New Zealand's eastern coast where scientists and other police and military personnel monitored the risky operation.

Scientists have warned that gases on the island are so toxic and corrosive that a single inhalation could be fatal.

Police Deputy Commissioner Wally Haumaha said the families cheered when they were told of the successful recovery of six bodies and expressed joy and relief.

"They've got their loved ones coming home," Haumaha said.

The bodies will be taken to Auckland for identification. The eight are thought to be six Australians and two New Zealanders, both tour guides.

Police said another recovery operation would be made later to recover the two bodies that couldn't be found. They are thought to be a tour guide and the captain of a boat that had taken tourists to the island.

Police Commissioner Mike Bush said police divers would search the sea around the island and aerial surveillance would be used to try locate the two victims.

"We do believe that at least one of them is in the water and the other one we are unsure," but the body may be in the sea as well, Bush said at a news briefing.

Conditions were good for the Friday's recovery operation, with light winds and calm seas, and the volcano was "quiet" as the team worked, Police Deputy Commissioner Mike Clement said.

The specialists were all safe, said Police Deputy Commissioner John Tims, who is also national operations commander. He praised "their efforts and the bravery they have shown."

Scientists have warned that White Island, the tip of a mostly undersea volcano, is "highly volatile," and has been venting steam and mud regularly.

The unrest delayed the recovery of the last victims of Monday's eruption, which occurred as 47 tourists and their guides were exploring the island. Many of the survivors were severely burned. Australia has returned several of its patients to burn units back home, and specialist medical teams were heading to New Zealand from Australia, Britain and the United States.

Skin banks were also sending tissue to New Zealand hospitals to use for grafts.

Authorities say 24 Australians, nine Americans, five New Zealanders, four Germans, two Britons, two Chinese and a Malaysian were on the island at the time. Many were from a Royal Caribbean cruise ship that had left Sydney two days earlier.

Associated Press journalist Steve McMorran in Wellington, New Zealand, contributed to this report.

US and China near deal that would suspend planned tariffs

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Trump administration and China are close to finalizing a modest trade agreement that would suspend tariffs that are set to kick in Sunday, de-escalating their 17-month trade war.

A "deal is close," said Myron Brilliant, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's head of international affairs, who has been briefed by both sides.

Brilliant said the administration has agreed to suspend Trump's plans to impose tariffs on \$160 billion in Chinese imports Sunday and to reduce existing tariffs, though it wasn't clear by how much.

In return, Beijing would buy more U.S. farm products, increase Americans companies' access to the

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Chinese market and tighten protection for intellectual property rights.

The deal awaits final approval from President Donald Trump.

Trump took to Twitter early Thursday to declare: "Getting VERY close to a BIG DEAL with China. They want it, and so do we!"

The president's comments triggered a daylong rally on Wall Street. The Dow Jones Industrial Average surged 220 points, or 0.8%.

Thursday evening, a senior administration official said a policy announcement regarding China would take place on Friday. The official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss internal planning.

Earlier Thursday, a spokesman for China's Ministry of Commerce, Gao Feng, had told reporters that "the economic and trade teams of both sides have maintained close communication." He offered no additional details.

Beijing had threatened to retaliate if Trump proceeded with plans to raise tariffs on \$160 billion of Chinese imports Sunday.

The two sides are negotiating a so-called Phase 1 agreement as part of the effort to resolve their sprawling trade dispute. Still, the truce leaves unsettled the toughest and most complex issues that have divided the two sides.

Three Democratic senators — Minority Leader Charles Schumer of New York, Ron Wyden of Oregon and Sherrod Brown of Ohio — sent a letter to the White House on Thursday, urging Trump to "stand firm" in the negotiations with China. They called on the president to hold out for "commitments from the Chinese government to enact substantive, enforceable and permanent structural reform."

The administration accuses Beijing of cheating in its drive to achieve global supremacy in such advanced technologies as driver-less cars and artificial intelligence. The administration alleges — and independent analysts generally agree — that China steals technology, forces foreign companies to hand over trade secrets, unfairly subsidizes its own firms and throws up bureaucratic hurdles for foreign rivals.

Beijing rejects the accusations and contends that Washington is simply trying to suppress a rising competitor in international trade.

Since July 2018, the Trump administration has imposed import taxes on \$360 billion in Chinese products. Beijing has retaliated by taxing \$120 billion in U.S. exports, including soybeans and other farm products that are vital to many of Trump's supporters in rural America.

On Sunday, the administration was set to start taxing an additional \$160 billion in Chinese imports, a move that would extend the sanctions to just about everything China ships to the United States.

Repeated rounds of negotiations had failed to achieve even a preliminary agreement. The prolonged uncertainty over Trump's trade policies has curtailed U.S. business investment and likely held back economic growth. Many corporations have slowed or suspended investment plans until they know when, how or even whether the trade standoff will end.

A far-reaching agreement on China's technology policies will likely prove difficult. It would require Beijing to scale back its drive to become a global powerhouse in industrial high technology, something it sees as a path to prosperity and international influence.

Efforts to acquire foreign technology are a theme that runs through Chinese law and government. Security researchers have asserted that Beijing operates a network of research institutes and business parks to turn stolen foreign technology into commercial products.

The Trump administration has been seeking a way to enforce any significant trade agreement with China, reflecting its contention that Beijing has violated past promises. One way to do is to retain some tariffs as leverage.

"They're two such different economies that don't trust each other," said Jessica Wasserman, a trade lawyer at Greenspoon Marder LLP.

Associated Press writer Darlene Superville contributed to this report.

'Lemonade' by Beyoncé is named the AP's album of the decade

By MESFIN FEKADU AP Music Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The top 15 albums of the decade by Associated Press Music Editor Mesfin Fekadu:

1. Beyoncé, "Lemonade": At the beginning of this decade, Beyoncé was already the greatest singer of her generation. She won a record six Grammys in a single night, had women AND MEN "oh-oh-oh'ing" to the fun sound of "Single Ladies" and continued to be a beast of a performer. But somehow Superwoman — shoot, she's Superman, too! — found a way to do more: Like a boss she launched her own company, Parkwood Entertainment, and really took the bull by the horns of her career. In 2011, she released the R&B adventure "4," featuring classics like "Countdown," "Love on Top," "Party," "End of Time," "I Care" and "I Miss You." Three years later — in surprise form — came "Beyoncé," her bold, audacious and daring album that showcased a new side of Beyoncé: Goodbye was the girl who cared about topping the charts, and born was an artist, a true storyteller, a grown woman. Somehow, she topped herself again with "Lemonade," which still tastes as good as it did when it was released in 2016. The usually private Beyoncé bares her soul on the album, singing about a troubled relationship, black pride and motherhood in a brave way. Lyrically, she's on point and honest over beats and sounds that range from rap to rock to country and pop. "Who the (expletive) do you think I am," she brashly asks on "Don't Hurt Yourself," which co-stars Jack White. The answer: the greatest of all time.

2. Rihanna, "Anti": Something was in the water in 2016: Beyoncé delivered "Lemonade" and Rihanna gave us the best album of her career with "Anti." Rihanna had been moving like the Energizer Bunny since releasing her first album in 2005. She also put out albums in 2006, 2007, 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012 — showing that she was a singer who knew how to pick a hit, record it and make it sound better than any other artist could. But she took four years to create "Anti," and the time was used wisely. No need to hit the skip button on this album as Rihanna shows her sultry side on "Kiss It Better," her twerk side on "Work" and her vocal chops on "Love on the Brain." Her hard work, work, work, work, work, work has truly paid off.

3. Beyoncé, "Beyoncé": See earlier entry.

4. Adele, "21": Back in my day — well in 2010 — record labels sent albums months in advance, and in November 2010 I received Adele's "21." Everything else around had to be turned off. I was sucked in. Months later, so was the world. THE ENTIRE WORLD. Adele was impressive on her 2008 debut, especially on "Hometown Glory," but with "21" she went deep, too deep, she was rolling in the deep! Literally. Each song made you feel something — sad, lonely, bouncy, fired up, calm, angry, lost. And nine years later, each song sounds as classic as they did at first listen, especially "Turning Tables," "Set Fire to the Rain" and the incomparable "Someone Like You."

5. Kendrick Lamar, "good kid, m.A.A.d city": All of Kendrick Lamar's albums released this decade have been masterpieces, including the 2011 independent release "Section.80" as well as the major-label projects "To Pimp a Butterfly" and "DAMN.," which won him the Pulitzer Prize for music as he made history as the first non-classical or jazz artist to win the prestigious prize. Lamar has profoundly mixed his poetry with hip-hop, jazz, soul, funk and African music to create songs that tackle blackness, street life, police brutality, survival and self-worth. And with 2012's "good kid, m.A.A.d city," this great kid immediately raised the bar not only in hip-hop, but in music period, forcing his peers to do better and try harder.

6. HAIM, "Days Are Gone": The sister trio HAIM reached perfection on their debut album. Hit play. And that is all.

7. SZA, "Ctrl": SZA is masterful and introspective on her confessional debut album, which follows a young woman going through life and the turbulent experiences that come with it, from dating dusty boys to dealing with self-doubt.

8. Janelle Monáe, "The ArchAndroid": According to contemporary pop folklore, Janelle Monáe arrived on the pop landscape from another planet, and boy do we need more artists from that sphere to land here now. On the beautifully theatrical "The ArchAndroid," she brilliantly paints the picture of an android, Cindi Mayweather, who finds out she is the chosen one and is trying to figure out how to handle her newfound

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mission. The versatile album has so many highpoints, including the Fela-flavored "Dance or Die," the playful "Tightrope," the groovy "Locked Inside" and the addictive "Faster."

9. Katy Perry, "Teenage Dream": I'll quote the opening line of my 2010 "Teenage Dream" review, which came before the album matched the record Michael Jackson's "Thriller" set by launching five No.1 hits: "Katy Perry's new CD is like a magical slot machine: Select any song and you'll hear a hit."

10. Bruno Mars, "24K Magic": Bruno Mars released three epic albums this decade, but "24K Magic" was a whole mood.

11. Solange, "A Seat at the Table": Solange's art-piece of an album will move you to think, and sing along, at the same time.

12. Sam Smith, "In the Lonely Hour": Unrequited love ruled Sam Smith's debut album, introducing the world to a piercing voice that is brave and honest.

13. Nas, "Life Is Good": Nas is still the best rapper alive. Don't at me.

14. Taylor Swift, "1989": After dabbling in it on "Red," former country singer Taylor Swift hopped, skipped and jumped into the pop music world with "1989," an adventurous album full of hits, hits and more hits.

15. Kacey Musgraves, "Golden Hour": With timeless songs like "Space Cowboy," "Butterflies," "Slow Burn" and "Lonely Weekend," Kacey Musgraves proved to not just be golden, but grand.

Regulators to set up 3-digit suicide hotline number like 911

By MAE ANDERSON AP Technology Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Federal regulators are setting up a new three-digit number to reach a suicide prevention hotline in order to make it easier to seek help and reduce the stigma associated with mental health.

Once it's implemented, people will just need to dial 988 to seek help, similar to calling 911 for emergencies or 311 for city services. Currently, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline uses a 10-digit number, 800-273-TALK (8255). Callers are routed to one of 163 crisis centers, where counselors answered 2.2 million calls last year.

"The three-digit number is really going to be a breakthrough in terms of reaching people in a crisis," said Dwight Holton, CEO of Lines for Life, a suicide prevention nonprofit. "No one is embarrassed to call 911 for a fire or an emergency. No one should be embarrassed to call 988 for a mental health emergency."

A law last year required the Federal Communications Commission to study assigning a three-digit number for suicide prevention. The FCC said in a report that there is overwhelming support for a three-digit number because it would be easier for distressed people to get help.

Thursday's vote starts the months-long process to make that happen. The next step is a comment period before the FCC moves to an order.

The government's action comes as suicide rates have increased across the U.S. over the past two decades, and dramatically so — by more than 30% — in half of U.S. states, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. There were 45,000 deaths in 2016, the latest year for which figures were available. The report noted that from 1999 to 2016, suicide increased in every state except Nevada. It also noted that suicide rates are higher with at-risk populations, including veterans and the LGBTQ community.

"More than 20 veterans die by suicide every day and more than half a million LGBTQ youth will attempt suicide this year alone," FCC Chairman Ajit Pai said. "A shorter, simpler suicide hotline number could be a game-changer."

The FCC determined that it would be better to have a new number that's only for the hotline, rather than one that's currently used for other purposes, such as 911. Advocates say that having a dedicated number, along with a message that mental health is of equivalent importance as medical emergencies, could help reduce the stigma of calling the number.

The new, shorter number would likely lead to more calls, which in turn would mean more expenses for crisis centers already struggling to keep up. If the number of calls to the hotline doubled, centers would need an extra \$50 million a year to handle the increase, the FCC said, citing the federal agency that funds the hotline, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

Holton said that while the increase in calls might cost more, it saves money in the long run because more people will be calling 988 instead of 911, which involves sending first responders and costs thousands of dollars.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, which is part of the Department of Health and Human Services, said people making calls because of suicidal thoughts can often be helped just by talking them through it, without needing to send a first responder.

Holton added that having first responders present doesn't always help people in crisis because they aren't necessarily trained to deal with mental health issues.

Although 988 won't be available by text, there are other texting services available. Lines for Life offers a text service by texting 273TALK to 839863.

AP Technology Writer Tali Arbel contributed to this story.

Did marathon bomber get fair trial? Court weighs arguments

By PHILIP MARCELO Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — The Boston Marathon bomber's lawyers urged a federal court to overturn their client's death sentence, arguing Thursday that intense media coverage and signs of juror bias led to an unfair trial.

The three-judge panel for the 1st U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals didn't render a decision on Dzhokhar Tsarnaev's sentence but devoted a significant amount of inquiry into how two jurors were allowed to remain on the case, even after their social media posts suggested they harbored strong opinions.

"You've got lots of qualifiable jurors in Boston," Judge William Kayatta said in one lengthy exchange with prosecutors. "You just need to make sure the government doesn't cause the court to pick the wrong ones. That's what it sounds like you did."

Tsarnaev was convicted of 30 charges, including conspiracy and use of a weapon of mass destruction, in the April 15, 2013, attack that killed three people and injured more than 260 others. Now 26, he is in a supermax prison in Colorado and didn't attend the hearing.

His lawyer Daniel Habib argued the 2015 trial should never have been held in Boston because of the intense local media coverage and the emotional toll the attack had on the region.

"The marathon bombings targeted a beloved and iconic civil institution," he said in his opening statement. "It traumatized an entire community whose members mourned the victims, sheltered in their homes behind locked doors during the manhunt, celebrated Tsarnaev's capture in the streets and together began to heal in the Boston Strong movement."

But Kayatta noted that polling submitted by the defense ahead of the trial suggested that almost two-thirds of Boston-area residents hadn't decided whether they thought Tsarnaev deserved the death penalty.

He also said the poll's findings suggested there wasn't a great disparity in public opinion of the case in Boston over other cities where the trial could have been held, such as New York.

The appellate judges homed in on Habib's argument that the trial's process for vetting jurors was flawed. Tsarnaev's lawyers had sought to disqualify two jurors before the trial started after discovering comments on social media about the bombings and trial.

One juror, who would go on to become the foreperson, published two dozen tweets after the bombings.

One of those was a retweet of a comment that called Tsarnaev a "piece of garbage." The juror also tweeted about her family's experience sheltering in place during the hunt for the bombers.

Another juror posted on Facebook as he was going through the jury selection process. His friends encouraged him to "play the part" in order to get on the jury and make sure Tsarnaev was convicted.

Prosecutors at the time downplayed the posts, and Judge George O'Toole allowed the jurors to remain on the case.

But under the Boston court's longstanding rules, the trial judge was obligated to ask more detailed follow-up questions after the social media posts came to light, said Judge O. Rogeriee Thompson.

Federal prosecutor William Glaser acknowledged O'Toole never did. Instead, he said, the judge simply

re-reviewed the transcripts of the jurors' prior interviews.

But Glaser maintained the jury selection process was rigorous.

"At the end of the day, it's not about what the jurors have heard or seen about the case," he argued. "It's whether they can set aside what they've heard or seen and decide the case on the evidence presented before them."

The appellate judges asked relatively fewer questions about the third major argument raised by Tsarnaev's lawyers: that O'Toole wrongly excluded evidence connecting Dzhokhar's older brother, Tamerlan, to a 2011 triple murder in Waltham, Massachusetts.

During the 2015 trial, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev's lawyers did not dispute that their client was involved in the marathon attack.

But they had hoped to highlight the still-unsolved Waltham murders as proof that 26-year-old Tamerlan Tsarnaev was radicalized and violent and had masterminded the marathon attack.

Tamerlan was killed in a gun battle with police days after the brothers detonated two pressure cooker bombs near the marathon finish line.

If the death sentence is overturned, prosecutors can seek a new sentencing trial or allow Tsarnaev to accept the life sentence his lawyers originally sought.

If the sentence is upheld, his lawyers have other options for appeal, including to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Melida Arredondo, whose husband, Carlos, famously helped victims at the marathon finish line, was among those in the packed courtroom Thursday.

Afterward, she said the concerns over the jury foreman's social media posts left an impression on her. But she hoped it wouldn't be enough to overturn the case.

"This should have been handled better," she said of the jury selection as she left the courthouse bundled for the bitter cold. "I thought this was all over."

Chile: Plane that vanished en route to Antarctica found

By EVA VERGARA and PATRICIA LUNA Associated Press

SANTIAGO, Chile (AP) — Searchers combing Antarctic seas have recovered parts of a military transport plane and human remains belonging to some of the 38 people aboard who vanished en route to the frozen continent, Chilean officials said Thursday.

Air Force Gen. Arturo Merino said at a news conference that based on the condition of the remains, he believed it would be "practically impossible" that any survivors would be pulled from the water alive.

An international team of searchers continued the hunt, while officials on shore said they would use DNA analysis to identify the crash victims.

Among the recovered items, searchers have found a landing wheel, sponge-like material from the fuel tanks and part of the plane's inside wall. Personal items include a backpack and a shoe, officials said.

"Remains of human beings that are most likely the passengers have been found among several pieces of the plane," Merino said. "I feel immense pain for this loss of lives."

The C-130 Hercules, a military transport plane, departed Monday afternoon from a base in Punta Arenas in far-southern Chile on a regular maintenance flight for an Antarctic base. Radio contact was lost 70 minutes later.

After midnight, the Air Force declared the plane a loss, but it wasn't until Wednesday that a plane scanning the seas first spotted floating debris believed to be from the plane.

The searchers located the remains roughly 30 kilometers (19 miles) from where pilots last made contact with the control tower, said officials, adding that the hunt has taken them to sea depths of 4,000 meters (13,123 feet).

Ed Coleman, a pilot and chair of the Safety Science Department at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Prescott, Arizona, said recovering the plane's flight recorder will be key to understanding what went wrong.

But recovering the bulk of the plane from the ocean's bottom — more than 2 miles underwater — could be very difficult. He said they could resort to taking video from remote operated vehicles.

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It may be impossible to return some of the crash victims to their families, he said. "It's possible that some of them may never be recovered," Coleman said. "A lot of times that happens in a deep-water recovery. It's just not possible."

The plane was flying over Drake Passage, the sea between the southern tip of South America and Antarctica, which is infamous for rapidly changing and often severe weather. Pilots say the driving storms with powerful wind gusts brings challenges.

The aircraft would have been about halfway to the Antarctic base when it lost contact, officials have said, adding that no emergency signals had been activated. Officials haven't said what they believe led the plane to crash.

Gen. Cristián Pizarro said that the first of the recovered human remains will arrive ashore Friday. Many relatives of the victims rushed to the Punta Arenas in search of answers.

Just three of the passengers were civilians, including Ignacio Parada, 24, who was a stand-out student of civil engineering in his last year at the University of Magallanes. He was headed to study drinking water systems at the military base.

Claudia Manzo, 37, was the only woman on board. She worked in the Air Force service that deals with aerial photographs of the continent. She also served as one of Parada's research advisers. She leaves behind a 5-year-old son.

Another of those aboard, electrician Jacob Pizarro, 38, had lost his wife five months ago, leaving behind two children, ages 2 and 6, who are in the care of their grandmother.

Defense Minister Alberto Espina expressed his gratitude for the international support in the search. It included 23 airplanes and dozens of ships from Argentina, Brazil, United States, Great Britain and Uruguay as well as Chile.

Associated Press writer Scott Smith contributed to this story from Caracas, Venezuela.

Today in History By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, Dec. 13, the 347th day of 2019. There are 18 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 13, 1981, authorities in Poland imposed martial law in a crackdown on the Solidarity labor movement. (Martial law formally ended in 1983.)

On this date:

In 1862, Union forces led by Maj. Gen. Ambrose Burnside launched futile attacks against entrenched Confederate soldiers during the Civil War Battle of Fredericksburg; the soundly defeated Northern troops withdrew two days later.

In 1918, President Woodrow Wilson arrived in France, becoming the first chief executive to visit Europe while in office.

In 1937, the Chinese city of Nanjing fell to Japanese forces during the Sino-Japanese War; what followed was a massacre of war prisoners, soldiers and citizens. (China maintains that up to 300,000 people were killed; Japanese nationalists say the death toll was far lower, and some maintain the massacre never happened.)

In 1944, during World War II, the light cruiser USS Nashville was badly damaged in a Japanese kamikaze attack off Negros (NEH'-grohs) Island in the Philippines that claimed 133 lives.

In 1977, an Air Indiana Flight 216, a DC-3 carrying the University of Evansville basketball team on a flight to Nashville, crashed shortly after takeoff, killing all 29 people on board.

In 1989, the film "Driving Miss Daisy," starring Morgan Freeman and Jessica Tandy, was put into limited release by Warner Bros.

In 1993, the U-S Supreme Court ruled, five-to-four, that people were entitled to a hearing before real

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property linked to illegal drug sales could be seized.

In 1997, a ribbon-cutting ceremony was held in Los Angeles for the 1 billion-dollar Getty Center, one of the largest arts centers in the United States.

In 2000, Republican George W. Bush claimed the presidency a day after the U.S. Supreme Court shut down further recounts of disputed ballots in Florida; Democrat Al Gore conceded, delivering a call for national unity.

In 2001, The Pentagon publicly released a captured videotape of Osama bin Laden in which the al-Qaida leader said the deaths and destruction achieved by the September 11 attacks exceeded his "most optimistic" expectations.

In 2002, Cardinal Bernard Law resigned as Boston archbishop because of the priest sex abuse scandal.

In 2003, Saddam Hussein was captured by U.S. forces while hiding in a hole under a farmhouse in Adwar, Iraq, near his hometown of Tikrit.

Ten years ago: The Senate passed, 57-35, a \$1.1 trillion spending bill with increased budgets for vast areas of the federal government, including health, education, law enforcement and veterans' programs. An attacker hurled a statuette at Italian premier Silvio Berlusconi, striking him in the face and leaving the stunned 73-year-old leader with a broken nose and two broken teeth. (The attacker, Massimo Tartaglia, was later found unfit to stand trial.) Nobel Prize-winning economist Paul Samuelson died in Belmont, Massachusetts, at age 94.

Five years ago: Thousands of protesters marched in New York, Washington and other U.S. cities to call attention to the killing of unarmed black men by white police officers who faced no criminal charges. Congress cleared a \$1.1 trillion spending bill for President Barack Obama's signature. Marcus Mariota won the Heisman Trophy, becoming the first Oregon player to earn the award. Bill Bonds, an iconic Detroit anchorman who'd also worked for ABC stations in New York and Los Angeles, died at age 82.

One year ago: Authorities confirmed that a 7-year-old girl who had crossed the U.S.-Mexico border with her father the previous week died after being taken into the custody of the U.S. Border Patrol; the girl had been flown to an El Paso hospital after she began having seizures. Bomb threats were emailed to hundreds of schools, businesses and government buildings across the country in what authorities said appeared to be a crude extortion attempt. The suspect in the shooting attack on a Christmas market in the French city of Strasbourg two days earlier was shot and killed by police. A Russian gun-rights activist, Maria Butina, admitted in a plea deal that she was a secret agent for the Kremlin who tried to infiltrate conservative U.S. political groups as Donald Trump rose to power. (Butina was deported the following October after serving a prison sentence.) Janet Jackson, Stevie Nix and Def Leppard were among those earning induction to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Today's Birthdays: Former Secretary of State George P. Shultz is 99. Actor-comedian Dick Van Dyke is 94. Actor Christopher Plummer is 90. Country singer Buck White is 89. Music/film producer Lou Adler is 86. Singer John Davidson is 78. Actress Kathy Garver (TV: "Family Affair") is 74. Singer Ted Nugent is 71. Rock musician Jeff "Skunk" Baxter is 71. Country musician Ron Getman is 71. Actor Robert Lindsay is 70. Country singer-musician Randy Owen is 70. Actress Wendie Malick is 69. Former Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack is 69. Former Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke is 66. Country singer John Anderson is 65. Singer-songwriter Steve Forbert is 65. Singer-actor Morris Day is 63. Actor Steve Buscemi (boo-SEH'-mee) is 62. Actor Johnny Whitaker (TV: "Family Affair") is 60. Rock musician John Munson (Semisonic; Twilight Hours) is 57. Actress-reality TV star NeNe Leakes is 53. Actor-comedian Jamie Foxx is 52. Actress Lusia Strus is 52. Actor Bart Johnson is 49. Actor Jeffrey Pierce is 48. TV personality Debbie Matenopoulos is 45. Rock singer-musician Thomas Delonge is 44. Actor James Kyson Lee is 44. Actress Kimee Balmilero (TV: "Hawaii Five-0") is 40. Actress Chelsea Hertford is 38. Rock singer Amy Lee (Evanescence) is 38. Actor Michael Socha is 32. Neo-soul musician Wesley Watkins (Nathaniel Rateliff & the Night Sweats) is 32. Actor Marcel Spears (TV: "The Mayor") is 31. Singer Taylor Swift is 30. Actress Maisy Stella is 16.

Thought for Today: "An orator without judgment is a horse without a bridle." — Theophrastus, Greek philosopher (c.371 BC - c.287 BC).