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GO INTO THE
WORLD AND DO
WELL. BUT MORE
IMPORTANTLY,
GO INTO THE
WORLD AND
DO GOOD.
-MINOR MYERS



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to
2020



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OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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Weekly Vikings Roundup

By Jordan Wright

The Minnesota Vikings held their destiny in their hands, and once again lost in embarrassing fashion. With division rival Green Bay coming into U.S. Bank Stadium, a place where the Vikings were undefeated, the Vikings had a good shot to take the Packers down and keep their hopes for the division title alive. What happened instead was a 23-10 beat down by Green Bay.

Great teams rarely lose, and good teams are at least competitive against other good teams. The Vikings have 10 wins this season, but have only managed to beat bad teams with losing records. After Monday night's fiasco, it's clear the Vikings don't belong in the conversation with the best teams in the NFL.

The Vikings' offense stunk on Monday. Kirk Cousins had one of the worst games in his career (16/31 for 122 yards, one touchdown and one interception). The offensive line gave up five sacks, many of which came when the Packers were only rushing three players. The Vikings had a paltry 57 rushing yards against one of the worst rush defenses in the NFL. Yes, the team was missing Dalvin Cook and Alexander Mattison, but between the combination of poor play calling and worse blocking, I doubt even Cook could've managed much more. Even the usually reliable receivers couldn't muster anything, with Stefon Diggs catching three passes for 57 yards and Adam Thielen unable to haul in a single catch all night.

The Vikings' defense was better than the Vikings offense, but that wasn't a high bar to clear on Monday. The focus was obviously to keep Aaron Rodgers in check, and that plan succeeded for the most part. Rodgers was held to only 216 yards, no touchdowns and one interception. With Minnesota shutting down the passing game, Green Bay decided to run the ball, and the Vikings were unable to stop it. Aaron Jones, the Packers' leading running back, had 154 yards and two touchdowns on the ground. The Vikings' defense finished the game with three sacks, five QB hits, five tackles for a loss, and five pass breakups.

The player of the game on offense was Ameer Abdullah. Usually the team's fourth-string running back and primary kick return specialist, Abdullah was asked to do more in this game and was the only player who seemed to get anything going. He finished with 27 rushing yards on four carries (compared to Mike Boone, who carried the ball 11 times for 28 yards) while also hauling in six catches (team lead) for 31 receiving yards (second on the team).

The player of the game on defense was Eric Kendricks, who has developed into one of the best middle linebackers in the NFL. Kendricks was forced out of this game early because of any injury, but not before he wrangled two fumbles.

Looking ahead, the Vikings stay at home to play the Chicago Bears. The Vikings are already locked into the sixth-seed, so there's really no reason for them to play any starters on Sunday. Chicago has a good defense but one of the worst offenses in the league. The Vikings SHOULD easily win this game, but who knows. Kickoff is at noon (CT) and will air on Fox. Skoll!

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Winter Storm Watch

URGENT - WINTER WEATHER MESSAGE

National Weather Service Aberdeen SD

348 AM CST Fri Dec 27 2019

...WINTER STORM WATCH NOW IN EFFECT FROM THIS EVENING THROUGH MONDAY MORNING...

* WHAT...Heavy snow mixed with some light freezing precipitation possible. Total snow accumulations of 13 to 18 inches and ice accumulations of up to two tenths of an inch possible. Winds could gust as high as 50 mph.

* WHERE...Portions of central, north central and northeast South Dakota.

* WHEN...From this evening through Monday morning.

* IMPACTS...Travel could be very difficult to impossible. Areas of blowing snow could significantly reduce visibility. The hazardous conditions could impact morning and evening commutes.
Gusty winds could bring down tree branches.

PRECAUTIONARY/PREPAREDNESS ACTIONS...

Monitor the latest forecasts for updates on this situation.

FDA SAYS TOBACCO AGE NOW 21

PIERRE (SD) – The U.S. Food & Drug Administration says that the federal minimum age of sale for tobacco products is now 21 years of age, effective immediately.

Last week President Trump signed legislation that raised the federal minimum age for purchase of tobacco products from 18 to 21. Although provisions in the law allow for a rulemaking period, a statement on the FDA website declares the law in immediate effect.

Here is the full statement:

“On December 20, 2019, the President signed legislation to amend the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act, and raise the federal minimum age of sale of tobacco products from 18 to 21 years. It is now illegal for a retailer to sell any tobacco product – including cigarettes, cigars and e-cigarettes – to anyone under 21. FDA will provide additional details on this issue as they become available.”

Although South Dakota state law has not been updated to align with the federal law, retailers should heed FDA guidance.

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Here are a few photos from the thick frost that was created from the fog over the weekend. (Photos by Paul Kosel)

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Hong Kong's pursuit of liberty **By Jason Najacht, Custer County Chronicle**

This article was originally published in the Dec. 11, 2019 edition of the Custer County Chronicle.

The predisposition of any government is tyranny. The predisposition of every human being is life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. It is when these dispositions clash that every human being must choose the path they will take.

The founders of the United States of America understood these principles. They understood that in the heart of every person there is a yearning to be free, to be unfettered, unchained from the things that benefit only their government. In short, they just want to be left alone.

The American Revolution sent shockwaves around the world as the fledgling colonies determined it was either liberty or death as Patrick Henry urged them to throw off the chains of government overreach and oppression. That set the colonies on a collision course with the crown and onto a path of self-determination. They called it The Great Experiment and, as Benjamin Franklin famously stated, he wasn't sure if the sun was rising or setting on the new colonies.

Nearly 250 years later, we know the answer to the question Benjamin Franklin asked. The United States has become the shining "city on a hill" that John Winthrop envisioned on his journey in 1630 to Massachusetts and is the beacon of freedom and liberty to the rest of the world.

The fact that the United States is that beacon of freedom has been evidenced for the world to see in protests that have rocked Hong Kong for the past several months. Protesters have been seen waving American flags, chanting "USA" and singing the "Star Spangled Banner" loudly and proudly. They have also pleaded with the United States for support, something they received recently as President Trump signed an important legislative decree of support— against China's wishes.

Notably, the Hong Kong protesters do not wave British, French, Spanish, Canadian or other flags, or sing other anthems. They wave American flags and they sing the American national anthem.

Hong Kong has a fond place in my heart. I've spent quite a bit of time traveling there for business, often staying for several weeks at a time. I found the people of Hong Kong to be very personable, extremely friendly, always helpful and superb hosts who were always concerned with my comfort.

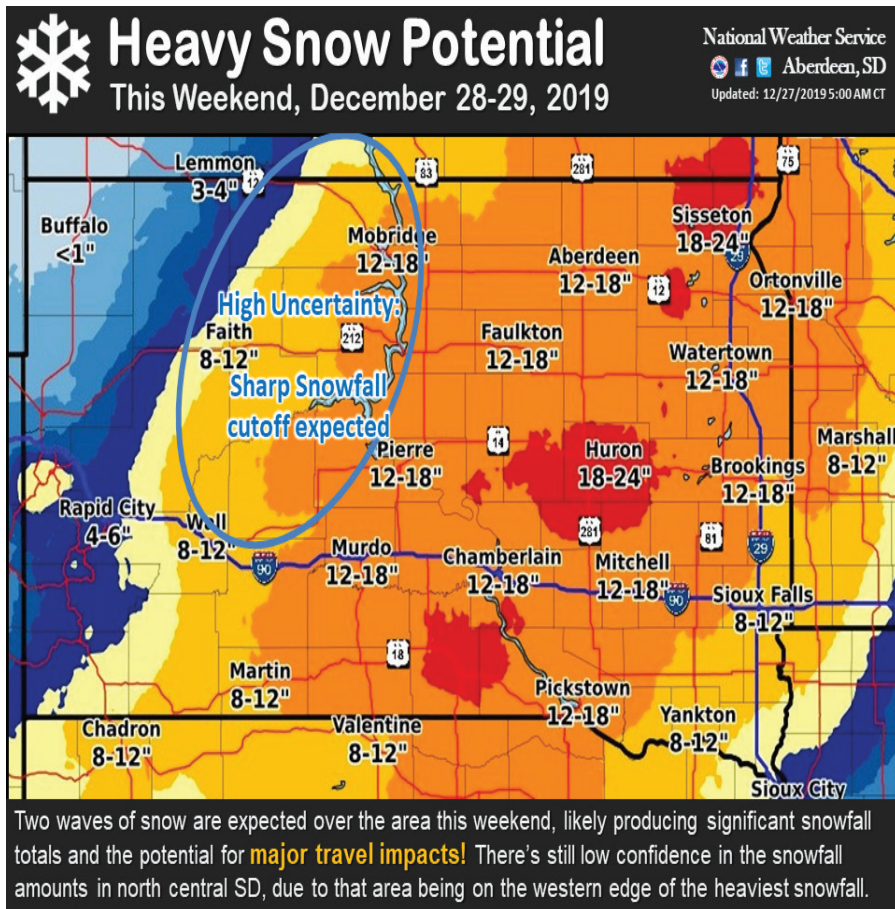
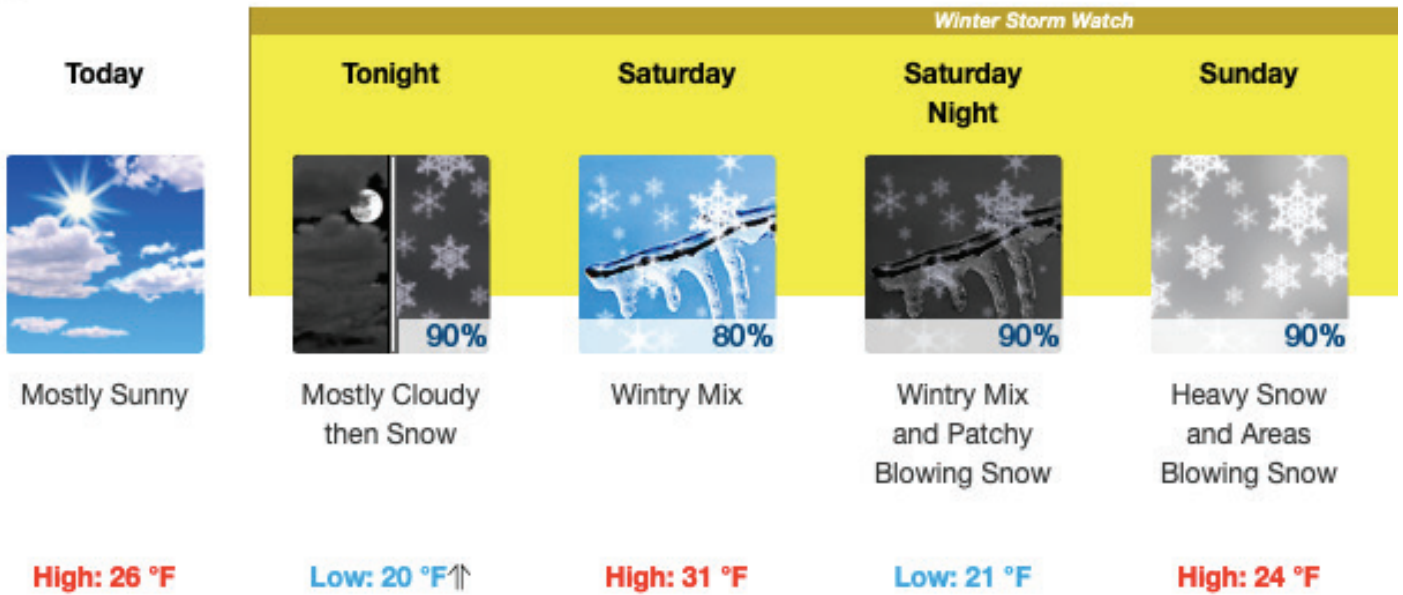
I often walked the streets at night after work and after dinner, finding my way to the local outdoor markets, and among thousands of others in the streets and markets. I found Hong Kong to be exhilarating, full of energy, always busy and quite safe. In fact, I always felt safe, whether traveling on the tram, subway, taxi or my favorite way of exploring— walking.

So it is with much interest I watch the events unfold in Hong Kong, knowing these gentle people must feel they have been pushed up against the wall and left with no other options, to react to their own government in the way they have.

Yes, Hong Kong is on its own path of self-determination as its gentle people search for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. What remains to be seen is whether the sun is rising or setting on their fledgling pursuit of liberty.

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This storm is expected to come in 2 waves. Friday night through Saturday morning light to moderate snow and possibly freezing rain is expected. After a brief break in precipitation, moderate to heavy snow and gusty winds are expected Saturday evening through Monday morning. Travel Sat/Sun could become difficult if not impossible. Monitor road conditions at www.safetravelusa.com.

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Today in Weather History

December 27, 1959: Precipitation began as freezing rain on the morning of the 27th throughout the eastern half of South Dakota, changing to snow mixed with occasional sleet late on the 27th, then continued as mostly snow through the late afternoon of the 28th. Glaze caused extensive breakage of tree limbs and power and telephone lines in southeast sections of the state and in scattered communities in the northeast counties. More than 40 communities were without telephone service for more than 24 hours. Highway travel was very dangerous; one man was killed when a tractor skidded on an icy highway and overturned on him in Kingsbury County. Strong winds averaging 20 to 25 mph both dates increased breakage of ice-laded utility wires and caused drifting and blocking of highways by the 3 to 6 inch snowfall. Damage and repair costs to utility lines were estimated at \$400,000.

December 27, 1987: A winter storm gave some freezing rain and snow to southern and eastern South Dakota and southwest and west central Minnesota on the 27th and 28th. In Minnesota, freezing rain began Sunday morning the 27th before changing to heavy snow, which extended into the 28th. The heaviest snowfall was across the high terrain of southwest Minnesota. In southern and eastern South Dakota, six to twelve inches of snow fell. Strong northwest winds of 20-40 mph hampered travel and snow removal. Snow drifts up to 6 feet deep were common. Across many areas of southern Minnesota, visibilities were reduced to zero due to blowing snow. Snowfall amounts in South Dakota included 12 inches in DeSmet; 10 inches in Wessington Springs and Madison; 9 inches in Huron; 8 inches in Pierre, Brookings, Mission and McCook County; 7 inches in Sioux Falls, Kadoka, Pine Ridge, and Martin. 8 inches also fell in Watertown and Highmore, with 7 inches at Bryant and 6 inches in Clear Lake.

December 27, 1987: Today marks the end of the infamous 2-day ice storm which began as freezing rain and sleet before sunrise on Christmas Day in Oklahoma. This ice storm left parts of Oklahoma without power for over a week. Sleet prevailed across the western and northern parts of Oklahoma City, while freezing rain devastated southern and eastern parts of the metro area. Despite heavy sleet and ice accumulations of up to 2 inches, total snowfall was only a trace.

December 27, 2001: Typhoon Vamei forms in the South China Sea, about 100 miles north of the Equator. Vamei is the first recorded tropical cyclone to develop within 1.5 degrees of latitude about 104 miles of the equator.

1869 - A post Christmas storm in New York and Vermont produced record storm totals of 30 inches at Burlington, VT, and 39 inches at Montpelier VT. A public emergency was declared in Vermont. (David Ludlum)

1892 - An Atlantic coast storm produced a record 18.6 inches of snow at Norfolk, VA, including 17.7 inches in 24 hours. The storm also produced 9.5 inches of snow at Raleigh NC, and brought snow to northern Florida for the first time in 35 years. (26th- 28th) (The Weather Channel)

1982 - The worst Louisiana rainstorm in more than 100 years came to an end. More than 18 inches fell at Vinton, LA, during the three day storm. Flooding was widespread, and property damage was estimated at 100 to 200 million dollars. President Reagan visited the state and declared ten parishes in northeastern Louisiana disaster areas. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A winter storm produced snow and high winds in Wyoming, Colorado and Nebraska. Denver CO experienced its worst snowstorm since December 1983 as high winds gusting to 46 mph created near blizzard conditions, whipping the fifteen inch snow into drifts five feet high, and closing Stapleton Airport. Snowfall totals in the foothills southwest of Denver ranged up to 42 inches, at Intercanyon. Blizzard conditions raged across southeastern Wyoming through the day, stranding 300 holiday travelers in the tiny town of Chugwater. Heavier snowfall totals included 19 inches at La Grange WY, and 22 inches at Elsmere NE. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Severe thunderstorms developing along a cold front in the south central U.S. spawned a dozen tornadoes in Mississippi between early afternoon and sunrise the following day. A tornado at Harpersville destroyed five chicken homes killing thousands of chickens. Strong thunderstorm winds gusted to 80 mph at Rolling Fork MS. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 27 °F at 6:12 PM

Low Temp: 18 °F at 6:01 AM

Wind: ----

Day Rain: 0.00

Record High: 54° in 1928, 1907

Record Low: -29° in 1914

Average High: 23°F

Average Low: 3°F

Average Precip in Dec.: 0.43

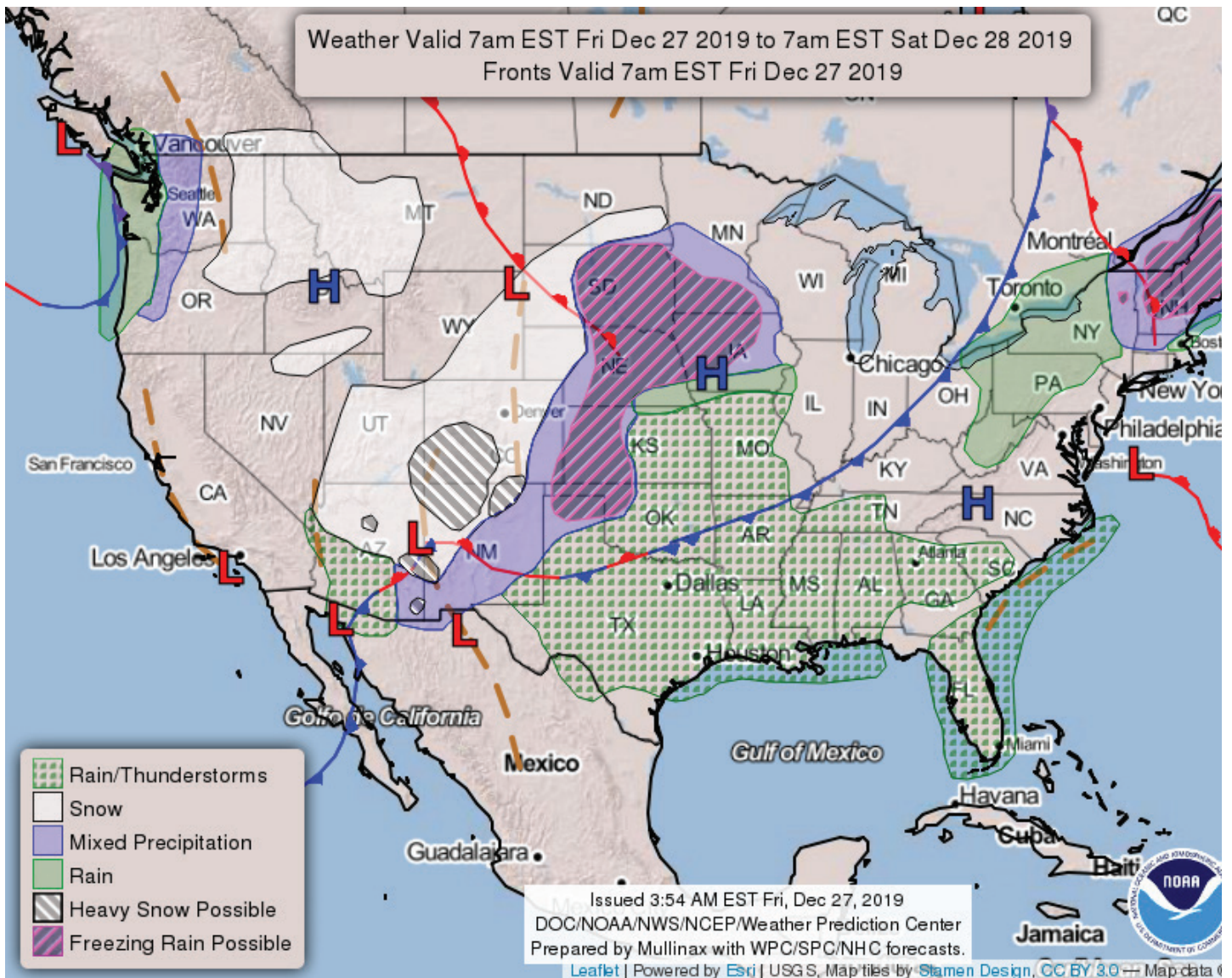
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.11

Average Precip to date: 21.63

Precip Year to Date: 28.06

Sunset Tonight: 4:57 p.m.

Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:13 a.m.





WHY FATHERS MATTER

We rarely think of Joseph when we speak of Mary and her son, Jesus. But Joseph was a very special individual as well.

In describing him, Matthew says that he was a "just" or "righteous" man. And, because of that, he was a "decent," "fair" and "righteous" man. When he was faced with an incredibly difficult decision, an angel appeared and advised him to "go ahead with your marriage to Mary."

Initially, Scripture informs us, "that not wanting to disgrace her, he planned to send her away." He was well aware of the fact that stoning was the legal prescription for what people would think of Mary's being pregnant without being married. If he took Mary to be his wife, he could be humiliated or ridiculed by those around him. But he chose to obey the command of the angel to marry her. As a "righteous" man he was also a "merciful" man, a man willing to listen to, hear from, and obey God. Joseph was a man of great character.

But there is more. Not only was he righteous, merciful, and obedient to the voice of God, but he was a man who was sensitive and discrete. Joseph was open to the voice of God and responded immediately when God spoke to him and protected the reputation and honor of Mary – thereby revealing he was a man of integrity.

Prayer: Lord, we pray for fathers everywhere who will strive to be like the earthly father of Your Son. We ask that You raise up men of integrity to honor You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly.

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2019 Groton SD Community Events

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)

News from the Associated Press

2 Sturgis police officers recognized nationally for bravery

STURGIS, S.D. (AP) — Two Sturgis police officers who pulled a man from a burning home in May 2018 are among 18 people selected to receive Carnegie Medals, known as the nation's highest civilian award for heroism.

Sturgis Police Sgt. Christopher Schmoker and Officer Dylan Goetsch are being recognized by the Carnegie Hero Fund Commission for rescuing Jason McKee, who had passed out from heavy smoke in an upper-level bedroom., the Rapid City Journal reported.

"I'm forever indebted to those two men," said McKee, 49, who is still recovering from smoke inhalation and burns to his throat.

Using water-soaked clothing tied around their faces as makeshift masks, the two officers dragged McKee's unconscious body down a stairway and got him to the home's front door, seconds before the fire overtook the living room and hallway where they had just been.

"We didn't do anything any other cop wouldn't have done. We just happened to be the two that were there," said Schmoker, 39.

Goetsch, 29, said he doesn't consider himself a hero.

"When you take a job in law enforcement or as a first responder, you want to help people," Goetsch said. "This is what I signed up for."

2 suspects wanted in attack on Huron officer remain at large

HURON, S.D. (AP) — Authorities are continuing their search two people involved in an attack on a police officer during an attempted traffic stop in Huron last week.

Police say they believe that 17-year-old Pan Toe Gaw fired numerous shots at the officer before the vehicle fled the scene. He is being charged as an adult for first degree attempted murder on a police officer and aggravated assault on a law enforcement officer with a firearm.

Another person in the vehicle, 27-year-old Keh Wah, is charged with accessory to aggravated assault on a law enforcement officer with a firearm.

Police say both suspects should be considered armed and dangerous.

The juvenile driver of the vehicle was apprehended after crashing into a snowbank following a short police pursuit. A passenger in the car, a 22-year-old male, was also arrested.

The police officer was not injured.

AG appoints state's attorney to Open Meetings Commission

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Attorney General Jason Ravnsborg appointed Turner County State's Attorney Katelynn Hoffman to a spot on the Open Meetings Commission on Thursday.

Ravnsborg made the appointment after Aurora County State's Attorney John Steele retired and left the commission. The Open Meetings Commission consists of five state's attorneys who oversee South Dakota's open meetings laws. The state requires "official meetings" by government bodies to be open and accessibly to the public.

Hoffman became a state's attorney in 2016 after working as a deputy state's attorney.

In a statement, Ravnsborg said of Hoffman, "I have no doubt that she will apply her knowledge and experience to this new role on an already strong commission."

Authorities identify 2 teens killed in South Dakota crash

VEBLEN, S.D. (AP) — Authorities have released the names of two teenagers killed in a crash in north-eastern South Dakota.

The South Dakota Highway Patrol said 18-year-old Bishop Swallow of Nemo and 17-year-old Samantha Shortman of Rosholt were killed in the crash near Veblen on Monday morning.

Swallow was driving the Chevrolet Impala on a gravel road when the car went into the ditch and hit a tree. Shortman was a passenger and died at the scene. Swallow died while he was being airlifted to a Sioux Falls hospital.

The patrol said both were wearing seat belts, the Argus Leader reported.

Police: Sioux Falls car thefts continue through holidays

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Police report the theft of 20 vehicles in Sioux Falls during the holiday season since Friday.

Authorities said that many of the cars are driven a few miles and then abandoned, according to KELO.com. Police have warned that vehicle thefts increase during the winter months when people leave their cars running to warm them up in cold weather.

Motivational conference costs South Dakota more than \$40,000

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — A recent motivational conference hosted by state agencies received 434 registrations and cost the state \$40,480, according to a spokeswoman for South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem.

The first-ever South Dakota LEADS Conference earlier this month at the Sioux Falls Convention Center was free and open to the public. There were conference tracks for students, educators and women.

The keynote address for each track was delivered by Clint Pulver, a motivational speaker from Utah. The state paid him \$17,750, according to the Rapid City Journal.

Other conference expenses included the facility rental, music and entertainment, travel costs for guests, food and signage.

The cost of the conference was expected to be split by the state Department of Education and state Department of Social Services, Noem's spokeswoman said. She said no decision has been made about whether to stage the conference next year.

"My hope is that people left the conference looking at themselves differently," Noem said in a statement. "I hope they understood more profoundly that they are created for a purpose — that they can serve as role models, change agents, and leaders."

The student conference agenda included presentations by Pulver, the Set Me Free Project, Microsoft and Melanie Weiss. The Set Me Free Project is an Omaha-based nonprofit that fights sex trafficking, and Weiss is a recovered opioid addict from Watertown.

The educator conference agenda included presentations by the Set Me Free Project, Microsoft and Pulver. The women's conference agenda included presentations by the Set Me Free Project, Microsoft, Weiss, Pulver and Noem.

Acting supervisor named for Black Hills National Forest

CUSTER, S.D. (AP) — An acting supervisor has been selected for the Black Hills National Forest until a replacement is named for the outgoing leader.

Andrew Johnson, currently the supervisor of the Bighorn National Forest in Wyoming, will manage the South Dakota wildness area for up to four months, the Forest Service says.

The current supervisor, Mark Van Every, is retiring next week. Johnson will start on Jan. 6.

The Black Hills National Forest covers 1.2 million acres in western South Dakota and northeastern Wyoming. Offices are located in Sundance and Newcastle, Wyoming and Custer, Rapid City and Spearfish, South Dakota, .

Russia commissions intercontinental hypersonic weapon

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russia's defense minister reported to President Vladimir Putin that a new hypersonic weapon of intercontinental range became operational Friday following years of tests.

Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu informed Putin that the first missile unit equipped with the Avangard hypersonic glide vehicle entered combat duty, the Defense Ministry said.

Putin unveiled the Avangard among other prospective weapons systems in his state-of-the-nation address in March 2018, noting that its ability to make sharp maneuvers on its way to a target will render missile defense useless.

The Russian leader described the Avangard's creation as a technological breakthrough comparable to the 1957 Soviet launch of the first satellite.

Earlier this week, Putin emphasized that Russia is the only country armed with hypersonic weapons. He noted that for the first time in history Russia is now leading the world in developing an entire new class of weapons, unlike in the past when it was catching up with the United States.

The military said that the Avangard is capable of flying 27 times faster than the speed of sound.

Russian media reports indicated that the Avangard will first be mounted on Soviet-built RS-18B intercontinental ballistic missiles, code-named SS-19 by NATO. It is expected to be fitted to the prospective Sarmat intercontinental ballistic missile after it becomes operational.

The Defense Ministry said last month that it demonstrated the Avangard to a team of U.S. inspectors as part of transparency measures under the New Start nuclear arms treaty with the U.S.

The U.S. has mulled new defense strategies to counter hypersonic weapons developed by Russia and China.

U.S. officials have talked about putting a layer of sensors in space to more quickly detect enemy missiles, particularly the hypersonic weapons. The administration also plans to study the idea of basing interceptors in space, so the U.S. can strike incoming enemy missiles during the first minutes of flight when the booster engines are still burning.

The Pentagon also has been working on the development of hypersonic weapons in recent years, and Defense Secretary Mark Esper said in August that he believes "it's probably a matter of a couple of years" before the U.S. has one. He has called it a priority as the military works to develop new long-range fire capabilities.

In Indonesia, ex-terrorists and victims cautiously reconcile

By KRISTEN GELINEAU Associated Press

TENGGULUN, Indonesia (AP) — The young Balinese widow stared across the courthouse at the man who had murdered her husband and 201 others, and longed to see him suffer.

Ever since that horrible night, when she realized amid the blackened body parts and smoldering debris that the father of her two little boys was dead, Ni Luh Erniati's rage at the men behind the bombing had remained locked deep inside. But now, it came roaring out.

She tried to scramble over a table blocking her path to hit Amrozi Nurhasyim, whose unrepentant grin throughout the trial over Indonesia's worst terrorist attack had earned him the nickname "The Smiling Assassin." And then she felt hands pulling her back, halting her bid for vengeance.

What would happen a decade later between her and Amrozi's brother — the man who had taught Amrozi how to make bombs — was unthinkable in that moment. Unthinkable that they would come face to face in a delicate attempt at reconciliation. Unthinkable that they would try to find the humanity in each other.

But inside that courthouse, and for years to come, Erniati wanted everyone associated with the 2002 bombings on the Indonesian island of Bali to be executed by firing squad. And she wanted to be the one to pull the trigger.

Her words to a reporter in 2012 were blunt: "I hate them," she said.

"I always will."

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The practice of reconciling former terrorists and victims is rare and, to some, abhorrent. Yet it is gaining attention in Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority nation. While Islam in Indonesia is largely moderate, the country has battled Islamic militants since the Bali attacks. Last year, two families carried out suicide bombings at churches, and in October, a militant stabbed Indonesia's top security minister.

The attacks have left Indonesia hunting for ways to prevent terrorism — and to heal from it.

Indonesia embraces a so-called soft approach to counterterrorism, where officials recruit former militants to try to change extremist attitudes in their communities, and jailed terrorists go through deradicalization programs. Last year, Indonesia's government brought together dozens of former Islamic militants and victims for what was billed as a reconciliation conference. The results were mixed.

More quietly, over the past several years, there has been a growing alliance of former terrorists and victims brought together under the guidance of a group founded by the victim of a terrorist attack. Since 2013, 49 victims and six former extremists have reconciled through the Alliance for a Peaceful Indonesia, or AIDA. They have visited around 150 schools in parts of Indonesia known as hotbeds for extremist recruiters, sharing their stories with more than 8,000 students.

The hope is that if former terrorists and victims can learn to see each other as human, they can stop the cycle of vengeance. While reconciliation efforts have been launched after several large-scale conflicts — such as South Africa's post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission — few attempts have been made in cases of terrorism.

"It's difficult for everyone to go through this," says Gema Varona, a Spanish researcher who studied reconciliation meetings between militants from the Basque separatist group ETA and their victims. "But it makes sense, because in terrorism, victims have been objectified. ... So we need that empathy."

Victims and perpetrators can learn to understand each other without legitimizing the violence, says Brunilda Pali, a board member of the European Forum for Restorative Justice.

"Understanding can help a lot," she says. "But it doesn't mean forgiving."

For Erniati, there was nothing at first to understand. How could she possibly understand something so horrific?

And why would she want to?

Erniati doesn't remember the first time she spotted the handsome, quiet waiter with the wavy black hair. But she remembers how much she and her fellow waitresses at the Sari Club idolized him.

Unlike the other men who worked at the popular nightclub, Gede Badrawan didn't flirt with customers. He only had eyes for Erniati.

Gede never asked her on a proper first date. They just fell into a relationship, and then into love, and a year later, into marriage. Two sons followed.

As a father, Gede was kind and doting. He took the family to play soccer at Kuta Beach, and to their favorite park. That park is the source of one of Erniati's most precious memories: of her younger son Made taking his first steps and starting to tumble, and of Gede catching him.

Around 11 p.m. on Oct. 12, 2002, Erniati had just settled into bed when a blast shattered the stillness.

She thought it was an electrical explosion. She didn't know that a suicide bomber had detonated himself inside Paddy's Pub, across the street from the Sari Club. She didn't know that seconds later, a van carrying a massive bomb and parked in front of the club had exploded. She wouldn't know until a witness told her much later that Gede had been standing near the van.

Erniati overheard people outside talking about bombs and body parts. She told herself Gede would return home after his shift ended.

When he didn't, she grew frantic. She wanted to search for him, but couldn't leave their sons — aged 9 and 1 — home alone. So Erniati, a Hindu, prayed for Gede until a friend arrived to watch the boys. As she sped toward the club on another friend's motorbike, she reassured herself: "My husband is alive. My husband is alive."

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When she got there, she knew instantly that he was not. The club was a wasteland. At the hospital, she saw bodies so mangled they were unrecognizable.

The bombings had been carried out by al-Qaida-affiliated Islamic militant group Jemaah Islamiyah. The attack killed mostly Western tourists.

It took four months before Erniati received confirmation that her husband was among the dead. When the forensics officer finally called, Erniati could manage only one question: "Exactly what condition is my husband's body in?"

"We probably identified about 70% of him," the officer replied. They had not found his head or his forearms or his abdomen or anything from the knees down.

For more than a year, Erniati continued to make Gede's breakfast, carefully laying the food on the table every morning, and throwing it away every night. He had been stolen from her so suddenly that part of her still felt he would come home.

Her tears made Made cry, so she shut herself in the bathroom to weep alone. She pretended for years that his father was simply away for work. He was 9 before she told him the truth.

In the midst of her agony, she searched for answers. But there were none to be found.

More than 1,000 kilometers (600 miles) from Bali, on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi, Ali Fauzi had received word of the carnage.

He was, he says, as stunned as the rest of the world. Though he was one of Jemaah Islamiyah's most skilled bombmakers, and though three of his brothers had helped orchestrate the attack, Fauzi says he knew nothing of the plot.

He was raised in the east Java village of Tenggulun, which would become an epicenter of Islamic extremism. His radicalization, he says, was heavily influenced by his big brother Ali Ghufron. Ghufron, who often went by the alias Mukhlas, studied at an Islamic boarding school under the spiritual leader of Jemaah Islamiyah.

In 1994, the group sent Fauzi to a military-style camp in the Philippines, where he honed his knowledge of explosives. He became Jemaah Islamiyah's chief bomb instructor, teaching countless men — including his brothers — how to construct lethal devices.

Everything unraveled after the bombs erupted in Bali.

His brothers Mukhlas, Amrozi and Ali Imron were charged with the attack, along with several other members of Jemaah Islamiyah. Fauzi found himself on a police wanted list and fled to the Philippines, where he says he was jailed for three years on a charge of illegally joining the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. He was then extradited to Indonesia.

Fauzi was never charged with the bombings, but he spent months in police detention in Jakarta. It was there that the kindness of a police officer who helped get him medical treatment began to chip away at his convictions about people he had long seen as the enemy.

Yet it wasn't until a night years later, when he found himself staring at a Dutch man named Max Boon, that Fauzi truly understood the horror of his life's work.

Boon was sitting in his hotel room, waiting for a former terrorist to knock on his door. He was terrified.

Four years earlier, a suicide bomber had detonated his devices in the Jakarta JW Marriott lobby lounge, where then-33-year-old Boon was attending a business breakfast. Police suspected the attack had been orchestrated by Jemaah Islamiyah.

Boon suffered burns to over 70 percent of his body. Doctors amputated most of his left leg and his lower right leg.

Yet the attack hadn't shaken Boon's belief in the goodness of humans. He believed that had the bomber met him before the Marriott attack, he might have realized Boon wasn't his enemy.

Boon threw himself into peacebuilding efforts, working through the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism at the Hague.

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Fauzi, meanwhile, had been working to help deradicalize Islamic militants across Indonesia. Which is how he ended up shaking hands with Boon at a terrorism awareness conference in 2013.

Boon had already been planning a project in which terrorism victims would share their stories with students in areas targeted by extremist recruiters. He invited Fauzi to stop by his room to discuss the idea.

Though Fauzi was not connected to the bombing that destroyed Boon's legs, Boon knew his history. As he waited, a dark thought rattled him: What if Fauzi was coming to finish the job?

But as Fauzi listened to the Dutch man talk about peace, he felt his heart crack.

That Boon, who was of a different faith, could forgive those who had caused him such pain rocked Fauzi to his core. He stared at the handsome young man sitting before him, with no legs where legs should be. And for the first time, he truly understood what a bomb does to a body and to a life.

Fauzi began to cry, and wrapped Boon in a hug. Boon hugged him back. Fauzi quickly agreed to meet other victims.

At the airport the next day, Fauzi sailed through security. But Boon's prosthetic legs set off the metal detector, forcing him to endure a pat-down. Boon turned to Fauzi and quipped: "So the former terrorist they let walk through, but the victim they have to control."

The former bombmaker burst out laughing and a friendship was born.

They had found the humanity in each other. Boon could only hope that when the others met Fauzi, they would find the same.

Erniati was filling her plate at a hotel buffet when Fauzi first approached her. Her heart pounded. How had she gotten here?

Months earlier, Boon had met with Erniati and several other bombing victims to present his idea. Erniati had balked.

For 12 years, she had struggled to move beyond her anger. The executions of Amrozi, Mukhlas and another convicted perpetrator had brought her no relief. The prospect of sitting down with a former terrorist sounded crazy.

A few victims, however, agreed to meet Fauzi for AIDA's pilot project. Afterward, their reviews were positive. Erniati warmed to the idea. Maybe he could answer her questions.

But now, staring at Fauzi inside the hotel where she and four other victims had gathered to meet him, she had no idea what to ask.

Fauzi's heart was pounding, too. "Hello," he said with a smile. "How are you?"

Erniati bristled. How could he smile after what he had done?

Her reply was curt: "I'm from Bali."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I apologize for what my brothers and my friends have done."

But Erniati couldn't get past his grin.

Fauzi saw the way the other victims were looking at him.

They hate me, he thought.

That night, Fauzi couldn't sleep. He lay in bed, fretting over what to say to Erniati and the others at their first official meeting.

When they finally convened around a table, Fauzi felt like a defendant on trial. Then Erniati began to tell her story.

As Fauzi listened, his awkwardness morphed into anguish. The image of Erniati searching for Gede amid the smoking ruins, of her struggles to raise their sons alone, was unbearable.

Fauzi had long been proud of his skills as a bombmaker. But in that moment, he wished he could erase everything he'd ever known about bombs.

He began to weep. "I'm sorry," he said through tears. "I'm very sorry."

Erniati looked at Fauzi and felt something shift within her. He was in pain, just as she was. Their pain came from different places, but it was pain all the same.

What he said meant less to her than what he felt. To Erniati, apologies are just words. But the ability to

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understand another person's suffering, she says, goes to the core of who you are.

The anger that had long suffocated her began to lift.

Fauzi excused himself to wash his tearstained face. When he returned, he told his own story, about his path in and out of radical ideology, and his commitment to peace.

His apologies, though, were not welcomed by all. One victim angrily rejected his words.

Fauzi understood. Were the situation reversed, he says, he doubts he would be as accepting as Boon and Erniati.

Over the next few years, Erniati and Fauzi grew closer. They visited schools with AIDA, sharing their story of reconciliation. Fauzi started a foundation called the Circle of Peace, which helps deradicalize extremists. Erniati was moved by his efforts, which seemed a genuine attempt to atone.

One day, Erniati asked Fauzi if she could see his home. It was a stunning request; The bombers had plotted the attack that killed her husband in a house not far away, and Mukhlas and Amrozi's families live just across the street.

But she wanted to see how Fauzi lived. And so, with some trepidation, Boon and others from AIDA agreed. As their car rolled into Fauzi's village, Erniati felt like she was entering a lion's den.

When she arrived at Fauzi's home, however, she found it reassuringly normal. There was laundry scattered around, just like at her house. Fauzi introduced her to his wife and children and showed her his goats.

When he had to break away to teach a class at Islamic school, he sent the group to a water park with his friend Iswanto, another former Jemaah Islamiyah militant. Erniati and Iswanto rode the rollercoaster together; for her, the ride was scarier than the one-time terrorist.

She and Fauzi became friends on Facebook. Fauzi sent Erniati a gem she had once mentioned was beautiful. She had it made into a necklace.

But she still couldn't accept what his brothers had done.

Erniati stands barefoot on the verandah of her modest home, slicing scissors through black fabric as Hindu chants ring out from a nearby temple. This is how she has kept her family alive for 17 years, through a small garment company an Australian man set up for Balinese bombing widows.

Her colleague, Warti, swings by. Like Erniati, Warti's husband was killed in the attack. Unlike Erniati, she has no desire to meet anyone associated with his killers. For her, all of that is best left in the past. To meet now, she says, would only cause her more pain.

"I don't want to dwell and keep thinking about it," she says.

Erniati understands this. She runs the Isana Dewata Foundation, an advocacy group for bombing victims, and knows everyone heals in different ways.

And reconciliation doesn't help everyone. Karen Brouneus, a Swedish psychologist, studied the effects of Rwanda's post-genocide, community-based court system, which focused on reconciliation. Her survey of 1,200 Rwandans found that those who participated in the courts had higher levels of depression and PTSD than those who didn't.

Those who have studied reconciliation efforts say victims must never be forced into them. The victims in AIDA's programs are all voluntary, Boon says. The foundation also carefully vets former extremists to ensure they have truly reformed, checking their background with Indonesian researchers and slowly getting to know them.

AIDA says the results of its efforts have been promising: Friendships have formed between former terrorists and victims. And after sharing their stories at schools, students' attitudes toward violence changed significantly, including a 68% decrease in those who agree they're entitled to revenge if they or their family fell victim to violence.

Fauzi himself acknowledges that reconciliation wouldn't work for every former militant.

"I realize that humans are different from one another," he says. "So it's not easy to take their hearts as a whole."

The uniqueness of these bonds is something that Jo Berry understands intimately. In 1984, Berry's father

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was killed in a bombing by the Irish Republican Army. In 2000, she asked to meet the man who planted the bomb, Patrick Magee, and the two became friends. Yet she has met plenty of former IRA activists she hopes to never meet again.

"It's not like there's one formula," she says. "And that's why I think it's really hard."

Erniati found that her warmth toward Fauzi did not carry over to his brothers. In 2015, she visited one of them, Ali Imron, in jail. He too apologized, but she wasn't convinced.

Her feelings toward the executed Amrozi and Mukhlas are even more muddled.

When it comes to them, she says, she just wants to forget.

On a sunny morning in east Java, Erniati and Fauzi sit on his couch, nibbling dates. The smile that once enraged Erniati she now returns.

Outside, around a dozen ex-Jemaah Islamiyah militants prepare for a local bicycle race. Erniati smiles politely at them, but keeps her distance.

Fauzi still wrestles with guilt, but Erniati's acceptance of him has lessened the sting.

Erniati continues to meet with former militants. She hopes her story can put them on the right path. Her sadness returns on occasion. But her anger is gone.

Later, she heads to lunch with Iswanto, the ex-militant with whom she'd ridden the rollercoaster years before. Along the way, he gestures toward a fenced-off enclosure on the side of the road.

This, he tells her, is the burial site of Amrozi and Mukhlas.

Erniati stares at the grassy plot. Someday, she says, she would like to place flowers on their graves and send up a prayer.

She will pray for God to forgive the men who killed her husband.

Not because she accepts what they did. But because if God can forgive them, even if she can't, then maybe their spirits can help bring the world what Fauzi's friendship helped bring her: peace.

Associated Press writer Niniek Karmini contributed to this report.

Israel's Netanyahu shores up base but obstacles remain

By JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu shored up his base with a landslide primary victory announced early Friday, but he will need a big win in national elections in March if he hopes to stay in office and gain immunity from prosecution on corruption charges.

Netanyahu handily defeated Gideon Saar, a former aide and Cabinet minister, in a Likud party primary held Thursday, winning 72% of the vote.

"This is the time to unite, to bring a sweeping victory to the Likud and the right in the Knesset elections," Netanyahu told reporters Friday. "The final and sweeping primary decision was a huge expression of trust in my way, in our way."

Only around half the party's 116,000 registered members turned out to vote, in part because of stormy weather. They represent the most faithful members of a party defined by fierce loyalty, which has only had four leaders since it was founded in the 1970s.

Netanyahu faces a much greater challenge in March — the third vote in less than a year — after failing to form a government in the last two elections, held in April and September.

This time around the stakes are much higher. Netanyahu was indicted last month on serious charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust. His best hope of escaping prosecution is to gain a 61-seat majority in parliament that is willing to grant him immunity.

"A candidate for prime minister who is under indictment and requests immunity for himself is something we've never had," Yossi Verter wrote in the Haaretz newspaper. "It's hard to see how he, with all his sophisticated campaigning abilities, can make this situation work in his favor."

The September vote left Netanyahu's Likud in a virtual tie with the centrist Blue and White party led by

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former army chief of staff Benny Gantz. Neither was able to form a majority with their natural allies, and they were unable to form a national unity government in part because Blue and White refused to accept an indicted prime minister.

Polls indicate the March vote would produce a similar outcome, rounding out more than a year of uncertainty in which Netanyahu has led a caretaker government.

"It appears that the defendant Netanyahu, who is leading the State of Israel down a path of corruption, will continue to lead Likud," Gantz said in a statement. "Blue and White must achieve a decisive outcome that will extricate us from both political deadlock and a path of corruption."

The Supreme Court is meanwhile set to meet next week to consider whether an indicted member of parliament is eligible to become prime minister. It's unclear when a ruling would be handed down, but if the court finds Netanyahu ineligible it could precipitate a constitutional crisis.

Reuven Hazan, a political science professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, said the court is likely to defer any ruling, potentially even until after the elections.

"They understand that if he wins big tonight and they turn around and say he cannot be prime minister, then although they've done their job, which is to make the right legal decision, that they will be in political turmoil that could rip the elections apart," Hazan said Thursday, before the primary results were announced.

Netanyahu is already Israel's longest-serving prime minister and has cultivated the image of a veteran statesman with close personal ties to President Donald Trump, Russian President Vladimir Putin and other world leaders.

His refusal over the last decade to make any concessions to the Palestinians was rewarded after Trump took office, as the U.S. began openly siding with Israel on several key issues.

Netanyahu's hard-line stance on Iran has also proved popular. He was a staunch opponent of the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, which has unraveled since Trump withdrew from the agreement. A wave of Israeli strikes on Iran-linked targets in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq in recent years has burnished Netanyahu's claims to having protected Israel from its enemies.

His fortunes have nevertheless waned over the past year. His party came in second place in September's elections, and two months later he was indicted on allegations of trading legislative and regulatory favors for lavish gifts and favorable media coverage.

Netanyahu has dismissed the indictment as an "attempted coup" by hostile media and law enforcement and has vowed to battle the charges from the prime minister's office.

The political uncertainty has led the Trump administration to delay the release of its long-anticipated Mideast peace plan.

The Palestinians have already rejected the plan, saying the administration is marching in lockstep with Israel's right-wing government. They point to Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital, to cut off virtually all aid to the Palestinians and to reverse longstanding opposition to Jewish settlements in annexed east Jerusalem and the West Bank, which Israel captured in the 1967 war.

Netanyahu has meanwhile said that Israel is on the cusp of securing U.S. support for the annexation of large parts of the occupied West Bank — but only if he remains in power.

That would all but extinguish the Palestinians' hope of one day establishing an independent state while cementing Netanyahu's legacy as a transformative leader.

In recent weeks, Netanyahu shifted away from the divisiveness of his previous campaigns and appeared rejuvenated as he met face-to-face with Likud supporters during a packed schedule of public events. He has long been seen as a political magician, and the new approach could allow him to pull off yet another comeback.

"One might say that Netanyahu seems reinvigorated and rejuvenated both for the election fight in March and the struggle against those corruption charges. Except that, in essence, they are two sides of the same coin," David Horowitz, the founding editor of the Times of Israel, wrote. "If he wins in March, he may have the political power to fend off those court cases as well with an immunity bid. If he loses, of course, even Likud may not again be so forgiving."

12 killed, dozens hurt after plane crashes in Kazakhstan

By VLADIMIR TRETYAKOV and DARIA LITVINOVA Associated Press

ALMATY, Kazakhstan (AP) — A plane with 98 people aboard crashed shortly after takeoff early Friday in Kazakhstan, killing at least 12 people, Kazakh officials said. There were 54 people hospitalized with injuries, at least 10 of them in critical condition.

The cause of the crash in the Central Asian nation was unclear, but authorities were looking at whether pilot error or technical failure were factors, Kazakhstan's deputy prime minister Roman Sklyar said.

The Bek Air aircraft hit a concrete fence and a two-story building after takeoff from Almaty, Kazakhstan's largest city and former capital. It lost altitude at 7:22 a.m. (0122 GMT), the Almaty International Airport said.

Sklyar said the plane's tail hit the runway twice during takeoff, indicating that it struggled to take off.

One survivor said that the plane started shaking less than two minutes after takeoff.

"At first the left wing jolted really hard, then the right. The plane continued to gain altitude, shaking quite severely, and then went down," Aslan Nazaraliyev, one of the passengers who survived the crash, told The Associated Press by phone.

Government officials said the plane underwent deicing before the flight, but Nazaraliyev recalled that the wings of the plane were covered in ice, and passengers who used emergency exits over the wings were slipping and falling down.

The plane was flying to Nur-Sultan, the capital formerly known as Astana.

Local authorities had earlier put the death toll at 15, but the Interior Ministry later revised the figure downward.

Officials in the Almaty branch of the Kazakh Health Ministry couldn't explain why the figure was revised, but attributed the confusion to the "agitation" at the site of the crash, speaking by phone with the AP.

In a statement on its Facebook page, the airport said there was no fire and a rescue operation got underway immediately.

Around 1,000 people were working at the snow-covered site of the crash. The weather in Almaty was clear and temperatures just below freezing.

Video footage showed the front of the broken-up fuselage rammed against a building and the rear of the plane lying in the field next to the airport.

In Almaty, dozens of people lined up in front of a local blood bank to donate blood for the injured.

The aircraft was identified as a Fokker-100, a medium-sized, twin-turboprop jet airliner. It was reported to be 23 years old and was most recently certified to operate in May. The company manufacturing the aircraft went bankrupt in 1996 and the production of the Fokker-100 stopped the following year.

All Bek Air and Fokker-100 flights in Kazakhstan were suspended pending the investigation of the crash, the country's authorities said.

Kazakhstan's air safety record is far from spotless. In 2009, all Kazakh airlines — with the exception of the flagship carrier Air Astana — were banned from operating in the European Union because they didn't meet international safety standards. The ban was lifted only in 2016.

Litvinova reported from Moscow.

Japan revises Fukushima cleanup plan, delays key steps

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Japan on Friday revised a roadmap for the cleanup of the tsunami-wrecked Fukushima nuclear plant, further delaying the removal of thousands of spent fuel units that remain in cooling pools since the 2011 disaster. It's a key step in the decadeslong process, complicated by high radiation and other risks. The government and the plant operator, Tokyo Electric Power Co., are keeping a 30- to 40-year completion target.

A look at some of the challenges:

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MORE THAN 4,700 UNITS OF FUEL IN POOLS

More than 4,700 units of fuel rods remain at the three melted reactors and two others that survived the 2011 earthquake and tsunami. They pose a high risk because their storage pools are uncovered and a loss of water in case of another major disaster could cause the fuel rods to melt, releasing massive radiation. Their removal at Units 1 and 2, after repeated delays, is now postponed by up to 10 years from the initial target of 2018, with more preparation needed to reduce radiation and clear debris and other risks.

Fuel rod removal at the Unit 1 reactor pool will begin sometime in 2027-2028, after debris is cleaned up and a huge rooftop cover installed to contain radioactive dust. Fuel removal at Unit 2 pool is to begin in 2024-2026. Work at the Unit 3 reactor pool began in April 2019 and all 566 units will be removed by March 2021. TEPCO has emptied the pool at Unit 4, which was offline and only suffered building damage, and aims to have all remaining rods in reactor pools removed by 2031 for safer storage in dry casks.

1.2 MILLION TONS OF RADIOACTIVE WATER

TEPCO has been unable to release the 1.2 million tons of treated but still radioactive water kept in nearly 1,000 tanks at the plant, fearing public repercussions and the impact on the area's struggling fishing and agriculture. The amount of water is growing by 170 tons daily because it is used to cool the melted fuel inside the reactors.

The Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry recently drafted a proposal to release the water to the sea or the air, or a combination of both. TEPCO says it can only store up to 1.37 million tons, or until the summer of 2022. Time is limited because preparation is needed before any water release. TEPCO and the government say the tanks pose risks if they were to spill their contents in another major earthquake, tsunami or flood. They also need to free up space to build storage for melted fuel removed from reactors beginning 2021.

The water is still somewhat contaminated, but TEPCO says further treatment can remove all but radioactive tritium to levels allowed for release. Experts say tritium is not harmful to humans in small amounts and has been routinely released from nuclear plants around the world.

880 TONS OF MELTED FUEL

Removing an estimated 880 tons of molten fuel from Fukushima's three melted reactors is the toughest and unprecedented challenge. It's six times the amount dealt with in the aftermath of the 1979 Three Mile Island partial core melt in the United States.

Removal is to begin in 2021 at Unit 2, where robotic probes have made more progress than at Units 1 and 3. A robotic arm was developed to enter the reactor from the side to reach the melted fuel, which has largely fallen to the bottom of the primary containment vessel. A side entry would allow the simultaneous removal of fuel rods in the pool from the reactor's top. The removal of melted fuel will begin with just a spoonful, which will be carefully measured and analyzed under International Atomic Energy Agency instructions. The government hopes to gradually expand the scale of the removal, though further expertise and robotic development is needed. The first decade through 2031 is a crucial phase that will affect future progress. Units 1 and 3 fell behind due to high radiation and water levels respectively, requiring more investigation.

770,000 TONS OF RADIOACTIVE WASTE

Japan has yet to develop a plan to dispose of the highly radioactive melted fuel and other debris that come out of the reactors. TEPCO will compile a plan for those after the first decade of melted fuel removal. Managing the waste will require new technologies to reduce its volume and toxicity. TEPCO and the government say they plan to build a site to store waste and debris removed from the reactors, but finding one and obtaining public consent will be difficult.

Additionally, there will be an estimated 770,000 tons of solid radioactive waste by 2030, including contaminated debris and soil, sludge from water treatment, scrapped tanks and other waste. They will be

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sorted, treated and compacted for safe storage under a plan to be compiled by 2028.

8 TRILLION YEN

The government says Fukushima's decommissioning cost is estimated at 8 trillion yen (\$73 billion), though adding compensation, decontamination of surrounding areas and medium-term storage facilities would bring the total to an estimated 22 trillion yen (\$200 billion). The Japan Center for Economic Research, a think tank, estimates that decommissioning alone would cost 51 trillion yen (\$470 billion) if the water is not released and tritium removal technology is pursued.

10,000 WORKERS

More than 10,000 workers will be needed annually in coming years, about one third assigned to work related to the radioactive water. Securing experienced workforce for the decadeslong cleanup is a challenge in a country with rapidly aging and declining population. Nuclear Regulation Authority Chairman Toyoshi Fuketa raised concerns about a possible labor shortage following recent minor mishaps at the plant. TEPCO has expressed intention of hiring workers for the decommissioning under Japan's new policy allowing more unskilled foreign labor, but the plan is on hold following government instructions to address language and safety concerns.

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

'Mame,' 'Hello, Dolly!' composer Jerry Herman dies at 88

By MARK KENNEDY Associated Press

Tony Award-winning composer Jerry Herman, who wrote the cheerful, good-natured music and lyrics for such classic shows as "Mame," "Hello, Dolly!" and "La Cage aux Folles," died Thursday. He was 88.

His goddaughter Jane Dorian confirmed his death to The Associated Press early Friday. He died of pulmonary complications in Miami, where he had been living with his partner, real estate broker Terry Marler.

The creator of 10 Broadway shows and contributor to several more, Herman won two Tony Awards for best musical: "Hello, Dolly!" in 1964 and "La Cage aux Folles" in 1983. He also won two Grammys — for the "Mame" cast album and "Hello, Dolly!" as song of the year — and was a Kennedy Center honoree.

Herman wrote in the Rodgers and Hammerstein tradition, an optimistic composer at a time when others in his profession were exploring darker feelings and material. Just a few of his song titles revealed his depth of hope: "I'll Be Here Tomorrow," "The Best of Times," "Tap Your Troubles Away," "It's Today," "We Need a Little Christmas" and "Before the Parade Passes By." Even the title song to "Hello, Dolly!" is an advertisement to enjoy life.

Herman also had a direct, simple sense of melody and his lyrics had a natural, unforced quality. Over the years, he told the AP in 1995, "critics have sort of tossed me off as the popular and not the cerebral writer, and that was fine with me. That was exactly what I aimed at."

In accepting the Tony in 1984 for "La Cage Aux Folles," Herman said, "This award forever shatters a myth about the musical theater. There's been a rumor around for a couple of years that the simple, hummable show tune was no longer welcome on Broadway. Well, it's alive and well at the Palace" Theatre.

Some saw that phrase — "the simple, hummable show tune" — as a subtle dig at Stephen Sondheim, known for challenging and complex songs and whose "Sunday in the Park with George" Herman had just bested. But Herman rejected any tension between the two musical theater giants.

"Only a small group of 'showbiz gossips' have constantly tried to create a feud between Mr. Sondheim and myself. I am as much of a Sondheim fan as you and everybody else in the world, and I believe that my comments upon winning the Tony for 'La Cage' clearly came from my delight with the show business community's endorsement of the simple melodic showtune which had been criticized by a few hard-nosed critics as being old fashioned," he said in a 2004 Q&A session with readers of Broadway.com.

Herman was born in New York in 1931 and raised in Jersey City. His parents ran a children's summer

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camp in the Catskills and he taught himself the piano. He noted that when he was born, his mother had a view of Broadway's Winter Garden Theatre marquee from her hospital bed.

Herman dated his intention to write musicals to the time his parents took him to "Annie Get Your Gun" and he went home and played five of Irving Berlin's songs on the piano.

"I thought what a gift this man has given a stranger. I wanted to give that gift to other people. That was my great inspiration, that night," he told The Associated Press in 1996.

After graduating from the University of Miami, Herman headed back to New York, writing and playing piano in a jazz club. He made his Broadway debut in 1960 contributing songs to the review "From A to Z" — alongside material by Fred Ebb and Woody Allen — and the next year tackled the entire score to a musical about the founding of the state of Israel, "Milk and Honey." It earned him his first Tony nomination.

"Hello, Dolly!" starring Carol Channing opened in 1964 and ran for 2,844 performances, becoming Broadway's longest-running musical at the time. It won 10 Tonys and has been revived many times, most recently in 2017 with Bette Midler in the title role, a 19th-century widowed matchmaker who learns to live again.

"Mame" followed in 1966, starring Angela Lansbury, and went on to run for over 1,500 performances. She handed him his Special Tony Award for Lifetime Achievement in 2009, saying he created songs like him: "bouncy, buoyant and optimistic."

In 1983 he had another hit with "La Cage aux Folles," a sweetly radical musical of its age, decades before the fight for marriage equality. It was a lavish adaptation of the successful French film about two gay men who own a splashy, drag nightclub on the Riviera. It contained the gay anthem "I Am What I Am" and ran for some 1,760 performances. Three of his shows, "Dear World," "The Grand Tour" and "Mack and Mabel," failed on Broadway.

Many of his songs have outlasted their vehicles: British ice skaters Torvill and Dean used the overture from "Mack and Mabel" to accompany a gold medal-winning routine in 1982. Writer-director Andrew Stanton used the Herman tunes "Put on Your Sunday Clothes" and "It Only Takes a Moment" to express the psyche of a love-starved, trash-compacting robot in the film "WALL-E."

Later in life, Herman composed a song for "Barney's Great Adventure," contributed the score for the 1996 made-for-TV movie "Mrs. Santa Claus" — earning Herman an Emmy nomination — and wrote his autobiography, "Showtune," published by Donald I. Fine.

He is survived by his partner, Marler, and his goddaughters — Dorian and Dorian's own daughter, Sarah Haspel. Dorian said plans for a memorial service are still in the works for the man whose songs she said "are always on our lips and in our hearts."

AP reporters Lynn Elber in Los Angeles and Mallika Sen in New York contributed to this report.

Powerful storm pounds Southern California with rain, snow

By STEFANIE DAZIO and JOHN ANTCZAK Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A cold and blustery winter storm unleashed downpours and extensive snowfall on Southern California, triggering a tornado and snarling post-Christmas travel on major routes Thursday.

Snow shut down vital Interstate 5 in Tejon Pass through the mountains north of Los Angeles and stopped traffic on Interstate 15 over Cajon Pass in the inland region to the east. I-15 finally reopened in both directions in the afternoon but then authorities later shut down about 45 miles (73 km) of the freeway from Baker, California, to Primm, Nevada, on the way to Las Vegas because of snow and ice.

A truck driver was found unresponsive in a rig stopped along I-5 in Tejon Pass. Kern County firefighters pronounced him dead, according to the California Highway Patrol's online incident log.

It was not immediately known if the death was weather-related.

After being stuck for five hours in Cajon Pass, motorist Johnny Lim wasn't sure he could reach Las Vegas, where he hoped to spend time after Christmas. He worried about driving his car through the pass when it reopens.

"The freeway is full of snow and ice," he said, adding that his car "is not built for conditions like this."

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I-5 rises to more than 4,100 feet (1,250 meters) in Tejon Pass between Los Angeles and the San Joaquin Valley. Cajon Pass rises to more than 3,700 feet (1,128 meters) between the San Gabriel and San Bernardino Mountains on I-15, the major connector between Southern California and Las Vegas.

Snow also stopped or slowed traffic on other California roads, including heavily traveled Interstate 8 in eastern San Diego County, and numerous trees were toppled.

In San Diego County, a 60-year-old woman died Thursday when a car veered off a snowy road near Warner Springs and crashed into an embankment. The woman passenger wasn't wearing a seatbelt and the driver was going too fast to control the car, California Highway Patrol Officer Jeff Christy told KSWB-TV.

On Wednesday night, a small tornado briefly hopped across Ventura Harbor, the National Weather Service reported. Gusts downed five trees, according to the Ventura County Star. Winds up to 65 to 85 mph (105 kph to 137 kph) also caused minor damage to nearby buildings, forecasters said.

Localized flooding inundated roads and freeway lanes while snow fell to low elevations, leading to numerous traffic accidents.

The town of Wrightwood at the eastern end of the San Gabriel Mountains had received 25 inches (63.5 centimeters) of snow by midday.

Famed Palomar Observatory in the San Diego County mountains said it would be closed at least through the weekend because of heavy snowfall.

Japan OKs divisive plan to send naval troops to Mideast

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Japan on Friday approved a contentious plan to send its naval troops to the Middle East to ensure the safety of Japanese ships transporting oil to the energy-poor country that heavily depends on imports from the region.

The Cabinet's decision reflects tensions that have escalated between Iran and the U.S. since President Donald Trump withdrew from Iran's 2015 nuclear deal.

"Taking into consideration the escalating tension in the Middle East, it is necessary to strengthen our information gathering effort," Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga told a news conference. Citing Japan's heavy dependence on oil imports from the region, Suga added that "it is extremely important to secure the safe navigation of Japan-affiliated ships."

Despite being a U.S. ally, Japan's troop dispatch is not part of a U.S.-led coalition protecting Middle East waterways, apparently an attempt to maintain neutrality in a show of consideration to Iran.

Under the plan, Japan will send about 260 Maritime Self-Defense Force personnel with a destroyer and a pair of P-3C reconnaissance aircraft, mainly for intelligence-gathering in the Gulf of Oman, the Arabian Sea and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait connecting the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

Defense Minister Taro Kono issued an order for the troops to start preparing for the operation, which is planned for one year beginning early next year.

Kono is to visit Djibouti on the eastern coast of Africa and Oman this weekend to discuss Japan's mission. Japanese troops have been based in Djibouti as part of an international anti-piracy effort off the Somali coast, and a P-3C unit currently in that operation will be shifted to the new mission in January, he said.

Japan will stay away from the Strait of Hormuz, where the U.S.-led coalition is operating.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe explained the plan to Iranian President Hassan Rouhani when he visited Tokyo last week.

Japan, which has friendly ties with both Iran and the U.S., also seeks to serve as a mediator between the two and play a greater role in restoring stability in the region, officials said.

The Middle East supplies more than 80% of Japan's oil needs.

Sending warships to areas of military tension is a highly sensitive issue in Japan because its pacifist post-World War II constitution limits the use of force by the military strictly to self-defense. Abe, however, has gradually expanded Japan's military role in recent years.

In June, a Japanese-operated tanker was attacked in the Gulf of Oman. Washington said Iran was re-

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sponsible and urged Japan to join the U.S.-led military initiative.

Petroleum Association of Japan Chairman Takashi Tsukioka welcomed a troop dispatch in a statement: "The Middle East situation continues to be uncertain and we believe it will contribute to the safety of ship navigation in the Middle East."

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

Iowa swung fiercely to Trump. Will it swing back in 2020?

By THOMAS BEAUMONT Associated Press

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — Few states have changed politically with the head-snapping speed of Iowa. In 2008, its voters propelled Barack Obama to the White House, an overwhelmingly white state validating the candidacy of the first black president. A year later, its Supreme Court sanctioned same-sex marriage, adding a voice of Midwestern sensibility to a national shift in public sentiment. In 2012, Iowa backed Obama again.

All that change proved too much, too fast, and it came as the Great Recession punished agricultural areas, shook the foundations of rural life and stoked a roiling sense of grievance.

By 2016, Donald Trump easily defeated Hillary Clinton in Iowa. Republicans were in control of the governor's mansion and state legislature and held all but one U.S. House seat. For the first time since 1980, both U.S. Senate seats were in GOP hands.

What happened? Voters were slow to embrace Obama's signature health care law. The recession depleted college-educated voters as a share of the rural population, and Republicans successfully painted Democrats' as the party of coastal elites.

Those forces combined for a swift Republican resurgence and helped create a wide lane for Trump.

The self-proclaimed billionaire populist ended up carrying Iowa by a larger percentage of the vote than in Texas, winning 93 of Iowa's 99 counties, including places like working-class Dubuque and Wapello counties, where no Republican since Dwight D. Eisenhower had won.

But now, as Democrats turn their focus to Iowa's kickoff caucuses that begin the process of selecting Trump's challenger, could the state be showing furtive signs of swinging back? Caucus turnout will provide some early measures of Democratic enthusiasm, and of what kind of candidate Iowa's Democratic voters — who have a good record of picking the Democratic nominee — believe has the best chance against Trump.

If Iowa's rightward swing has stalled, it could be a foreboding sign for Trump in other upper Midwestern states he carried by much smaller margins and would need to win again.

"They've gone too far to the right and there is the slow movement back," Tom Vilsack, the only two-term Democratic governor in the past 50 years, said of Republicans. "This is an actual correction."

Iowans unseated two Republican U.S. House members — and nearly a third — in 2018 during midterm elections where more Iowa voters in the aggregate chose a Democrat for federal office for the first time in a decade.

In doing so, Iowans sent the state's first Democratic women to Congress: Cindy Axne, who dominated Des Moines and its suburbs, and Abby Finkenauer, who won in several working-class counties Trump carried.

Democrats won 14 of the 31 Iowa counties that Trump won in 2016 but Obama won in 2008, though Trump's return to the ballot in 2020 could change all that.

"We won a number of legislative challenge races against incumbent Republicans," veteran Iowa Democratic campaign consultant Jeff Link said. "I think that leaves little question Iowa is up for grabs next year."

There's more going on in Iowa than simply a merely cyclical swing.

Iowa's metropolitan areas, some of the fastest growing in the country over the past two decades, have given birth to a new political front where Democrats saw gains in 2018.

The once-GOP-leaning suburbs and exurbs, especially to the north and west of Des Moines and the corridor linking Cedar Rapids and the University of Iowa in Iowa City, swelled with college-educated adults in the past decade, giving rise to a new class of rising Democratic leaders.

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"I don't believe it was temporary," Iowa State University economist David Swenson said of Democrats' 2018 gains in suburban Des Moines and Cedar Rapids. "I think it is the inexorable outcome of demographic and educational shifts that have been going on."

The Democratic caucuses will provide a test of how broad the change may be.

"I think it would be folly to say Iowa is not a competitive state," said John Stineman, a veteran Iowa GOP campaign operative and political data analyst who is unaffiliated with the Trump campaign but has advised presidential and congressional campaigns over the past 25 years. "I believe Iowa is a swing state in 2020."

For now, that is not a widely held view, as Iowa has shown signs of losing its swing state status.

In the 1980s, it gave rise to a populist movement in rural areas from the left, the ascent of the religious right as a political force and the start of an enduring rural-urban balance embodied by Republican Sen. Chuck Grassley and Democratic Sen. Tom Harkin.

Now, after a decade-long Republican trend, there are signs of shifting alliances in people like Jenny O'Toole.

The 48-year-old insurance industry employee from suburban Cedar Rapids stood on the edge of the scrum surrounding former Vice President Joe Biden last spring, trying to get a glimpse as he shook hands and posed for pictures.

"I was a Republican. Not any more," O'Toole said. "I'm socially liberal, but economically conservative. That's what I'm looking for."

O'Toole is among those current and new former Republicans who dot Democratic presidential events, from Iowa farm hubs to working-class river towns to booming suburbs.

Janet Cosgrove, a 75-year-old Episcopal minister from Atlantic, in western Iowa, and Judy Hoakison, a 65-year-old farmer from rural southwest Iowa, are Republicans who caught Mayor Pete Buttigieg's recent trip.

If such voters are a quiet warning to Trump in Iowa, similar symptoms in Wisconsin and Michigan, where Democrats also made 2018 gains, could be even more problematic.

Vilsack has seen the stage change dramatically. After 30 years of Republican dominance in Iowa's governor's mansion, he was elected in 1998 as a former small-city mayor and pragmatic state senator.

An era of partisan balance in Iowa took hold, punctuated by Democratic presidential nominee Al Gore's 4,144-vote victory in Iowa in 2000, and George W. Bush's 10,059-vote re-election in 2004.

After the 2006 national wave swept Democrats into total Statehouse control for the first time in 50 years, the stage was set for Obama's combination of generational change, his appeal to anti-Iraq War sentiment and the historic opportunity to elect the first African American president.

"We were like a conquering army, prepared to negotiate terms of surrender," said Cedar Rapids Democrat Dale Todd, an early Obama supporter and adviser.

Todd was one of a collection of Iowa Democratic activists who gathered at a downtown Des Moines sports bar last year to commemorate the 10-year anniversary of Obama's historic caucus campaign.

Just across the Des Moines River in the state Capitol, there was a reminder of how much the ground had shifted since those heady days.

Republicans control all of state government for the first time in 20 years. Part of their wholesale conservative agenda has included stripping public employee unions of nearly all bargaining rights, establishing new voter restrictions and outlawing abortion six weeks into a pregnancy.

It was in line with Republican takeovers in states such as Wisconsin that were completed earlier, but traced their beginnings to the same turbulent summer of 2009.

On a Wednesday in August that year, throngs flocked to Grassley's typically quiet annual county visits to protest his work with Democrats on health care legislation.

Thousands representing the emerging Tea Party forced Grassley's last event from a community center in the small town of Adel to the town park, where some booed the typically popular senator and held signs stating, "Grassley, you're fired."

The events became a national symbol for uneasiness about the new president's signature policy goal.

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The previous April, Iowa's nine-member Supreme Court — Democratic and Republican appointees — had unanimously declared same-sex marriage legal in the state. A year later, Christian conservatives successfully campaigned to oust the three Supreme Court justices facing retention, waving the marriage decision as their cause.

Four years later, Democrats had high expectations of holding the retiring Harkin's Senate seat. But Democratic U.S. Rep. Bruce Braley lacked Harkin's populist appeal, and was beaten by state Sen. Joni Ernst, an Iraq War veteran from rural Iowa who painted Braley as an elitist lawyer.

By 2016, Republicans had completed their long-sought statehouse takeover, in part by beating longtime Senate Majority Leader Mike Gronstal.

"We tried in many cases to win suburbia, but we just couldn't lay a glove on it," Gronstal said. "We just could not figure out how to crack it in Iowa."

The answer for Democrats in Iowa is much the same as the rest of the country: growing, vote-rich suburbs. Dallas County, west of Des Moines, has grown by 121% since 2000, converting from a checkerboard of farms into miles of car dealerships, strip malls, megachurches and waves of similarly styled housing developments.

It had been a Republican county. However, last year, long-held Republican Iowa House districts in Des Moines' western suburbs fell to Democrats.

It was the culmination of two decades of shifting educational attainment with political implications. Since 2000, the number of Iowans with at least a college degree in urban and suburban areas grew by twice the rate of rural areas, according to U.S. Census data and an Iowa State University study.

Last year, a third of urban and suburban Iowans had a college diploma, up from 25% at the dawn of the metropolitan boom in 2000. Rural Iowans had inched up to just 20% from 16% during that period.

"The more that occurs, the more you get voter participation leaning toward Democratic outcomes than has historically been in the past," Swenson said, noting the higher likelihood of college-educated voters to lean Democratic.

Since 2016 alone, registered Democrats in Dallas County have increased 15%, to Republicans' 2%. Republicans still outnumber Democrats in the county, but independent voters have leaped by 20% and for the first time outnumber Republicans.

"There is now a third front," Gronstal said. "We can fight in those toss-up rural areas, hold our urban base, but now compete in those quintessentially suburban districts."

Though Trump's return to the ballot in 2020 shakes up the calculus, his approval in Iowa has remained around 45% or lower. A sub-50 rating is typically problematic for an incumbent.

Another warning for Trump, GOP operative Stineman noted, is The Des Moines Register/CNN/Mediacom Iowa Poll's November finding that only 76% of self-identified Republicans said they would definitely vote to re-elect him next year.

With no challenger and 10 months until the election, a lot can change.

"Still, that's one in four of your family that's not locked down," Stineman said.

There are also signs Iowa Democrats have shaken some of the apathy that helped Trump and hobbled Clinton in Iowa in 2016.

Democratic turnout in 2018 leaped from the previous midterm in 2014 from 57% to 68%, according to the Iowa Secretary of State. Republican turnout, which is typically higher, also rose, but by a smaller margin.

Overall turnout in Iowa, as in more reliably Democratic-voting presidential states of Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, was down in 2016, due mostly to a downturn in Democratic participation.

"The trend was down, across the board," said Ann Selzer, who has conducted The Des Moines Register's Iowa Poll for more than 25 years. "So it doesn't take much to create a Democratic victory in these upper Midwestern states."

"I think the success in the midterms kind of made people on the Democratic side believe that 'we can do it,'" Selzer said.

Perhaps, but Trump has his believers, too.

Newseum hailed free press, but got beaten by free museums

By ASHRAF KHALIL Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — In 2008, the Newseum — a private museum dedicated to exploring modern history as told through the eyes of journalists — opened on prime Washington real estate.

Sitting almost equidistant between the White House and the Capitol on Pennsylvania Avenue, the glass-walled building became instantly recognizable for its multi-story exterior rendition of the First Amendment.

Eleven years later that experiment is coming to an end. After years of financial difficulties, the Newseum will close its doors Tuesday.

"We're proud of how we did our storytelling," said Sonya Gavankar, the outgoing director of public relations. "We changed the model of how museums did their work."

The building was sold for \$372.5 million to Johns Hopkins University, which intends to consolidate its scattered Washington-based graduate studies programs under one roof.

Gavankar attributed the failure to a variety of factors but acknowledged that the Newseum's status as a for-pay private institution was a harder sell in a city full of free museums. A Newseum ticket costs \$25 for adults, and the building is right across the street from the National Gallery of Art and within blocks of multiple Smithsonian museums.

"Competing with free institutions in Washington was difficult," Gavankar said.

Another problem, organizers said, is that the Newseum struggled to attract local residents, instead depending on a steady diet of tourists and local school groups. Actual Washington-area residents, who do frequent the Smithsonian and elsewhere, mostly came on school trips and rarely returned as adults.

Claire Myers fits that profile. The D.C. resident recalls coming to the Newseum in high school in a senior-year class trip. She only returned in late December for a final visit because she heard it was closing at the end of the year.

"I do think part of the reason was because it's a paid museum," she said. "Why go out of my way to do this when I could just go to any other free museum?"

The \$25 price tag, Myers said, creates a pressure to set aside the whole day and take in every exhibit, whereas at one of the free Smithsonian museums, she knows she can come back another time to catch whatever she missed. But Myers said she was deeply impressed by the exhibits, particularly the Newseum's signature gallery of Pulitzer Prize-winning photographs.

"I do wish it wasn't going away," she said.

The museum's focus evolved over the years, showcasing not just journalism and historic events, but all manner of free speech and civil rights issues and some whimsical quirks along the edges. Exhibits during the Newseum's final days included an exploration of the cultural and political influence of Jon Stewart and "The Daily Show," a look at the history of the struggle for LGBTQ rights and a display depicting the history of presidential dogs.

Gavankar said the Freedom Forum, which originally maintained the Newseum in northern Virginia for years, would continue its mission in different forms. The educational foundation maintains a pair of exhibits on the Berlin Wall in both Reagan and Dulles airports. Next year, those displays will be replaced by exhibits on the women's suffrage movement. The current Rise Up! exhibit on LGBTQ rights will move to a new long-term home in the Museum of Pop Culture in Seattle.

Venezuela's poorest struggle to take care of their dead

By SCOTT SMITH and SHEYLA URDANETA Associated Press

MARACAIBO, Venezuela (AP) — The last time anybody in Nerio García's family heard his voice was on a crackly call from jail outside Maracaibo, Venezuela's second city. He called from a borrowed cellphone, pleading to his brother for help.

"Tell Mother to bring me some food," García, 29, said in the 2 a.m. call, relatives later recounted.

Another call from a fellow inmate said García had stolen a gun and escaped, drawing his mother, Juana Castillo, to the overcrowded jail in Cabimas. She was desperate for answers, but was instead told to go

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looking on the shoreline of nearby Lake Maracaibo. There, she found him shot between the eyes and floating in the water.

"I'm desperate," Castillo told The Associated Press, while with her son's body at a morgue near the jail. "I want to take my son home to bury him near me."

While the family may never know the truth of his death, the grisly discovery set the grief-stricken mother on a scramble to rescue her son's body from the water and to find enough money to bury him.

Death has become an overwhelming financial burden for many of Venezuela's poorest, who already struggle to find dignity in life. They scrape together food and shelter needed to get through each day, and a relative's death can become the breaking point.

The cost of transporting a body and buying a casket and burial plot for a funeral can run into the hundreds of dollars, or more. In Venezuela, most earn the minimum wage of roughly \$3 a month as hyperinflation devours pay.

Some overcome the financial burden of a relative's death by renting caskets, a cheaper option than buying. Others turn to amateur morticians, who embalm bodies at home and convert wooden furniture into coffins.

For many in Maracaibo, Venezuela's economic crash in the last five years hit especially hard. Once a center of the nation's vast oil wealth, production under two decades of socialist rule has plummeted to a fraction of its high, taking down residents' standard of living.

Opposition leader Juan Guaidó this year launched a campaign promising to oust President Nicolás Maduro and return the nation to its bygone prosperity. While the power struggle plays out, millions of Venezuelans remain caught in the middle. The poor and wealthy alike in Maracaibo live with rationed electricity, and despite the region's abundant oil, they often wait in line for days to gas up their cars.

Among life's struggles, too often comes the need to provide a relative with a funeral.

Community activist Carolina Leal has assumed the role of funeral director in her poor and often violent Maracaibo neighborhood of Altos de Milagro Norte, hoping to rid families of unnecessary misery she has seen too many times.

Leal said police only enter when they are coming to mete out deadly street justice, while too many others die from long, agonizing illnesses such as AIDS and tuberculosis. She has also witnessed deaths from malnutrition and poisoning from people eating garbage in the street.

"This slum here has turned into a living hell," Leal said. "Some bodies were decomposing at home because officials we asked didn't help. It's infuriating."

Leal has formed a team with two other neighbors who employ their unique skills to bring dignity to the dead. One busy month recently, Leal said she oversaw 12 funerals.

Upon learning of a death, carpenter Arturo Vielma visits the mourning family's home, asking what wooden furniture, like a table or standalone closet, they can spare for him to build a casket.

Roberto Molero next comes to embalm the body with no training other than seeing it done during a decade that he worked as a driver at a funeral home. This gives families time to mourn and come up with money while they make funeral arrangements before the body decomposes.

Molero's kit includes a sewing needle and thread to stitch together faces of those killed in violent clashes with police. He charges the equivalent of \$5.

"Not everyone can pay that, so some I've let go for free," Molero said. "What are you going to do if we grew up together?"

Leal's contribution stems from her former role as a socialist party enforcer. She says she has abandoned a violent past, but isn't shy about cajoling officials at the mayor's office to provide a burial place. Once, she pressed her point by bringing a coffin to city hall until officials found a grave site.

Venezuela's crisis has reshaped the funeral industry.

Funeral homes in Maracaibo said that in the last two years they have started renting caskets to families for \$50. The family returns the casket and sends their loved one's body to be cremated, making it dramatically cheaper than buying a coffin for \$100 to \$300.

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Furniture maker Sergio Morales for years crafted tables, chairs, bed frames and night dressers, but as Venezuela's crisis deepened, he began using the same wood, nails and glue to build simple wooden caskets for less than \$100. They are on display outside on the street.

The indignities of death don't quickly end. Thieves often raid graves for valuables, while public cemeteries often go abandoned, overgrown with weeds.

When families cannot afford headstones for loved ones at the Maracaibo public cemetery, each rain storm erases any sign of a fresh grave, making it impossible for them to find their loved one's plot when they return.

García's mother described how she put aside an urge to find justice for her son's death and focused rather on how she would rescue his body and bury it. With help at the lake shore, they tied him to a tree so he didn't drift away, and next told police, who pulled the body from the water and delivered it to the morgue. The autopsy showed he was shot in the head and also in the back.

García had been jailed for two years following a family feud and was expected to go free just days after being shot in the jail, his attorney said. Instead, his mother and siblings set out borrowing money from neighbors to cover the funeral expenses.

They finally brought him home to a poor Maracaibo neighborhood, where the family lives in a half-built shack made of cinder blocks. It's only partially covered by a roof and lacks glass for the windows.

They mourned over the casket, placing a plastic bottle on the ground, scrawled with the word "donations." Incense burned to mask the smell, and his sisters took turns shooing away flies drawn to the decomposing body.

At the cemetery, they lowered the casket into a donated burial plot. His mother, shaky on her legs, stepped to the grave and placed inside three small loaves of bread and a malt drink.

She said this was her way of feeding her son, satisfying the hunger he had cried about in his final call home hours before his death.

Scott Smith on Twitter: @ScottSmithAP

Christmas typhoon leaves 28 dead, 12 missing in Philippines

By JIM GOMEZ Associated Press

MANILA, Philippines (AP) — A strong typhoon that barreled through the central Philippines left at least 28 dead and 12 missing, and forced thousands to flee their homes, devastating Christmas celebrations in the predominantly Roman Catholic country.

Typhoon Phanfone stranded many people in sea and airports at the peak of holiday travel, set off landslides, flooded low-lying villages, destroyed houses, downed trees and electrical poles and knocked out power in entire provinces. One disaster response officer described the battered coastal town of Batac in Iloilo province as a "ghost town" on Christmas Day.

"You can't see anybody because there was a total blackout, you can't hear anything. The town looked like a ghost town," Cindy Ferrer of the regional Office of the Civil Defense said by phone.

The storm weakened as it blew into the South China Sea with sustained winds of 120 kilometers (74 miles) per hour and gusts of 150 kph (93 mph), after lashing island after island with fierce winds and pounding rain on Christmas Day, the weather agency said.

Most of the deaths reported by police and local officials were due to drowning, falling trees and accidental electrocution.

A father, his three children and another relative were among those missing in hard-hit Iloilo province after a swollen river inundated their shanty.

The typhoon slammed into Eastern Samar province on Christmas Eve and then plowed across the archipelago's central region on Christmas, slamming into seven coastal towns and island provinces without losing power.

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Provincial officials, army troops, police and volunteers spent Christmas away from home to tend to thousands of displaced residents in town gymnasiums and schools turned into emergency shelters. Many more people spent Christmas Eve, traditionally a time for family reunions, in bus terminals.

More than 25,000 people were stranded in sea ports across the central region and outlying provinces after the coast guard prohibited ferries and cargo ships from venturing into dangerously choppy waters. Dozens of international and domestic flights to and from the region were canceled, including to popular beach and surfing resorts.

About 20 typhoons and storms batter the Philippines each year. The Southeast Asian nation is also located in the Pacific "Ring of Fire," where earthquakes and volcanic eruptions often occur, making the country of more than 100 million people one of the world's most disaster prone.

Phanfone, a Laotian word for animal, traveled along a path similar to that of Typhoon Haiyan, one of the most ferocious storms on record, which left more than 7,300 people dead and missing, flattened entire villages, swept ships inland and displaced more than 5 million people in the central Philippines in 2013.

Massive redwood tree falls, kills hiker in California park

Associated Press undefined

MUIR WOODS NATIONAL MONUMENT PARK, Calif. (AP) — A huge redwood tree fell and killed a man visiting Muir Woods National Monument in California on Christmas Eve, authorities said Thursday.

Subhradeep Dutta, 28, of Edina, Minnesota, died while walking on a marked dirt trail with two other people in the park north of San Francisco famous for its towering trees, according to the Marin County coroner's office and a spokesman for the park.

Dutta was pinned by the trunk of the 200-foot-tall (61-meter-tall) tree and died at the scene. The trunk measured more than 4 feet (1 meter) in diameter.

A woman injured by falling debris was taken to the hospital. A man hiking with the group escaped injury.

Dutta described himself on social media as a software engineer who enjoys traveling and taking occasional hikes. On his Facebook page, he posted photos of himself visiting natural wonders in the U.S., including Rocky Mountain National Park and the Grand Canyon.

The tree that killed Dutta fell close to sunset, when the park was about to close. Alex Shepard told KPIX-TV that he and his mother were finishing their hike when they heard a "colossal noise" and saw the tree come down.

"I initially thought it was like an earthquake or something. I had no idea. I had never heard a sound like that," Shepard said.

The tree fell following a series of winter storms over the past two weeks.

"This is a very rare and isolated event that may have occurred due to wet ground from recent winter storms, around the roots of the tree," park spokesman Charles Strickfaden said in an email.

Redwood trees have shallow root systems that extend over 100 feet from the base. They thrive in moist, coastal climates where their roots intertwine with the roots of other redwoods.

Almost a million visitors visit the park each year. It was open Thursday and only the areas affected by debris from the fallen tree were closed to the public.

Israel's embattled Netanyahu wins landslide in primary

By JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Thursday scored a landslide victory in a primary race for leadership of the ruling Likud party, giving the embattled leader an important boost ahead of the country's third election in less than a year.

The strong showing by Israel's longest-serving leader could give him another opportunity to form a government following the March election, after falling short in two previous attempts this year. By easily fending off Likud lawmaker Gideon Saar, Netanyahu also kept alive his hopes of winning immunity from prosecution after being indicted last month on a series of corruption charges.

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"A giant victory," Netanyahu tweeted early Friday, just over an hour after polls closed.

"Thanks to the members of Likud for the trust, support and love," he added. "God willing, I will lead Likud to a big victory in the coming elections."

In a tweet, Saar congratulated Netanyahu and said he would support the prime minister in the national election. "I am absolutely comfortable with my decision to run," he added. "Whoever isn't ready to take a risk for the path he believes in will never win."

Official results released by Likud showed Netanyahu capturing 41,792 votes, or 72%, compared with 15,885 votes, or 28%, for Saar.

While removing any doubts about Netanyahu's standing in the ruling party, the primary is likely to prolong Israel's political uncertainty. Netanyahu will remain at the helm of Likud through the March elections, and his lingering legal troubles could again scuttle efforts to form a government after that.

In September's election, both Likud and its main rival, the centrist Blue and White party, were unable to secure a parliamentary majority and form a government on their own.

The two parties together captured a solid majority of parliamentary seats, leaving a national unity government as the best way out of the crisis. But Blue and White has refused to sit in a partnership with Netanyahu when he is under indictment.

Opinion polls predict a similar outcome in the March election, raising the possibility of months of continued paralysis. The country already has been run by a caretaker government for the past year.

Netanyahu, who has led the country for the past decade, maintained his position atop the political right by cultivating an image as a veteran statesman with close ties to U.S. President Donald Trump, Russian President Vladimir Putin and other world leaders.

His refusal to make any concessions to the Palestinians was rewarded after Trump took office, as the U.S. began openly siding with Israel on several key issues, validating Netanyahu's approach in the eyes of many Israelis and adding to his mystique.

Netanyahu's hard-line approach to Iran has also proved popular. He was a staunch opponent of the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, which has unraveled since Trump withdrew from the agreement. A wave of Israeli strikes on Iran-linked targets in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq has burnished Netanyahu's claims to having protected Israel from its enemies.

His fortunes have nevertheless waned over the past year, after he was unable to form a government following the unprecedented back-to-back elections in March and September. His party came in second place in September, leading many observers to view the vote as the beginning of the end.

In November, Netanyahu was indicted on charges of fraud, breach of trust and accepting bribes, the culmination of three long-running corruption investigations. Netanyahu vowed to remain in office, dismissing the indictment as an "attempted coup" by hostile media and law enforcement.

Reuven Hazan, a political science professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, said the victory for Netanyahu would have no impact on the general election.

"It simply means that he's managed to maintain control of the party," he said. "It just means that the faithful have circled the wagons. It means nothing for the elections except that he looks good. He looks strengthened."

Netanyahu appeared rejuvenated in recent weeks as he hit the campaign trail, doing several live events a day where he rallied supporters in small gatherings and face-to-face meetings.

"The Likudniks have witnessed an astonishing event play out in the past two weeks, in which a 70-year-old leader who has had his fill of terms in office has thrown himself at every last registered party member," Israeli columnist Ben Caspit wrote in the Maariv daily.

The approach appears to have paid off and may serve as a template for a more effective general election campaign. In the meantime, Israel will remain in limbo for at least another two months.

Netanyahu, who also served as prime minister in the late 1990s, is desperate to remain in office, where he is best positioned to fight the corruption charges. Israeli law requires public officials to resign if charged with a crime. But the law does not apply to sitting prime ministers.

As long as he remains in office, Netanyahu can use the position as a bully pulpit to criticize his prosecu-

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tors. He also can offer political favors in hopes of rallying a majority of lawmakers who favor granting him immunity from prosecution.

"His game is to be prime minister because that is a shield from indictment," Hazan said.

Despite the victory, Netanyahu has many hurdles ahead.

The Supreme Court is set next week to begin considering whether an indicted member of parliament can be tasked with forming a new government. Its decision could potentially disqualify Netanyahu from leading the next government. It's not clear when a ruling would be handed down.

The political uncertainty has led the Trump administration to delay the release of its long-anticipated Mideast peace plan.

The Palestinians have already rejected the plan, saying the administration is hopelessly and unfairly biased toward Israel. They point to Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital, to cut off virtually all aid to the Palestinians and to reverse longstanding opposition to Jewish settlements in east Jerusalem and the West Bank, which Israel captured in the 1967 war.

Meanwhile, Netanyahu has said Israel is on the cusp of securing U.S. support for the annexation of large parts of the occupied West Bank — but only if he remains in power.

That would virtually extinguish the Palestinians' hopes of one day establishing an independent state, but it would cement Netanyahu's legacy as perhaps the most successful right-wing leader in the country's history.

Sudan's Christians enjoy holiday amid hope for new freedoms

By MARIAM FAM Associated Press

KHARTOUM, Sudan (AP) — The Sudanese Christian marchers weaved through bustling markets and traffic-clogged streets wearing "I Love Jesus" T-shirts or colorful traditional robes known as thobes.

"Glory to God in the highest. And on Earth, peace, goodwill toward men," a speaker said. Hymns blared and chants of "hallelujah" intermingled with loud, emotion-filled cries of celebration. Passersby and merchants snapped photos or flashed victory signs.

The marching group from the Bahri Evangelical Church was small, but the symbolism of the moment loomed much larger. The March for Jesus holiday tradition had been suspended in recent years under authoritarian President Omar al-Bashir, whose government was accused of harassing and marginalizing Christians and other religious minorities.

This holiday season, a year after the eruption of the uprising against al-Bashir, Sudan is transitioning away from his three-decade repressive rule. The military overthrew him in April after months of pro-democracy protests. A transitional military-civilian administration now rules the country.

Though some caution against being overly optimistic about expanded religious freedom, Monday's march was one small sign of new openings.

"Hallelujah! Today, we are happy that the Sudanese government has opened up the streets for us so we can express our faith," said Izdhar Ibrahim, one of the marchers. Some Christians had been frightened before "because we used to encounter difficulties."

The changes started in 2011, after South Sudan gained independence from Sudan following a long war and a referendum. South Sudan is mostly Christian and animist, a belief that all objects have a spirit. Al-Bashir's government then escalated its pressure on the remaining Christians, human-rights campaigners and Christians say.

Al-Bashir, who came to power in an Islamist-backed military coup in 1989, failed to keep the peace in the religiously and ethnically diverse country.

Noah Manzul, one of the church elders, said the march was treated almost as if it were a "crime."

Its return is "an expression of religious freedom," Manzul said. "We can live our lives with ease."

Manzul's social work with homeless children and orphans got him into trouble under al-Bashir, when he was accused of trying to convert the children to Christianity, an allegation he denies. Activities like singing hymns in the teeming market outside the church were stopped, he said.

To be sure, some Christians said they were not impacted negatively by al-Bashir's government, and of-

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ficials at the time disputed that the government targeted Christians.

But Suliman Baldo, senior adviser at the Enough Project, which supports peace and an end to atrocities in Africa's conflict zones, said the ultimate goal under al-Bashir was "to limit the influence of the church." Under his rule, Christian church properties could be seized, Baldo said, adding some churches were demolished, and some preachers were arrested.

During past holiday seasons, many recalled, posters would appear on the streets warning against celebrating with the "kofar," or infidels, a reference to Christians.

But this year, Dec. 25 was declared a public holiday. Earlier, a Christian woman was appointed to the country's interim ruling Sovereign Council.

Pastor Hafiz Dasta, of the Bahri church, said a Muslim cousin can now ring in the season with him.

"I always celebrated with him at Eid al-Adha," Dasta said, referring to the Islamic feast. "He couldn't celebrate with me on Christmas because he would be working. This time around ... we will celebrate together and eat together," he said before Christmas.

The church is still embroiled in legal cases stemming from land and other disputes, Dasta said. But at least on the day of the march, it was all about celebrating Jesus. "How great is freedom!" he exclaimed during the gathering.

Ezekiel Kondo, archbishop of the Episcopal Church of Sudan, said he was encouraged by government efforts but he wants to see more changes such as the legalization of some churches. Many Christians acknowledge that some churches were built without permits, but they say obtaining the required paperwork under al-Bashir's government proved virtually impossible.

"They would say come back tomorrow, and tomorrow never comes," Kondo said.

Kondo, like some, says it is too early to know if there's "complete freedom, especially religious freedom."

As recently as June, nearly two months after al-Bashir's removal, a violent security crackdown left scores of pro-democracy protesters dead. As Sudan marked the first anniversary of the anti-al-Bashir protests, Amnesty International urged transitional authorities to protect rights and deliver on change demands, including accountability for the killings. Some pro-democracy activists also pointed to what they say are discriminatory laws that remain on the books even as they commend the repeal of a notorious moral policing law.

At least one influential group of outside observers says the changes are encouraging, despite the challenges.

Anurima Bhargava, a member of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, said in a phone interview that a commission meeting earlier in December with the Sudanese Prime Minister, Abdalla Hamdok, and other officials was "one of the most promising meetings that we've had."

She said commissioners raised concerns that included the demolition of some churches and the damage to church properties under al-Bashir.

Hamdok, appointed in August, and other Sudanese government officials outlined efforts to ensure protection of religious freedoms and human rights, including trying to make changes to apostasy and blasphemy laws, she said.

"They're working on a bunch of different fronts. I think it's going to take some time for all of that to be felt," Bhargava said.

The efforts have been noted. In a Dec. 20 statement from U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, the State Department announced that Sudan had been dropped from a list of countries that have engaged in or tolerated "systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom" and upgraded to a special watch list. It attributed the change to "significant steps" taken by the transitional government.

Back in Bahri, the marchers sang the Sudanese national anthem, waved Sudanese flags and swayed to hymns. One passerby rhythmically clapped to the blaring music. A driver honked his horn to the beat. Others pumped their fists in the air in support or gave the revelers thumbs-up.

Men and women pressed small books, like the Gospels of Luke and John, into the palms of onlookers. Some paged through them. Others tucked them in their pockets or turned them down.

Nahla Motassim, a Muslim, didn't want a book but said she supports the march.

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"The former regime restricted freedom of religions ... when they themselves didn't apply Islam. The regime was unjust," she said. "I believe in something and someone else believes in another thing ... That's between him and God, but I live with him, eat with him and drink with him."

The march "symbolizes freedom of expression and of opinion in our diverse country after 30 years of oppression to all kinds of Sudanese," marcher Finlay Philemon said. "I'm so happy."

As he spoke, a woman peered from behind the door to her house. Later, she came out.

"Merry Christmas," the woman, Magdolin Mohamed, told him. "May you always live in peace and safety."

"Same to you," he responded with a wide smile.

Mohamed, a Muslim, said she wanted to salute the celebrants "because we are all one people."

Tears rolled down her face.

"Before, they didn't give them the opportunity to go out and celebrate like that," she said in between sobs. "I am so happy for them. I am happy that freedom is back, that life is back in Sudan."

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2 kicked out of National Guard over white supremacist ties

ATLANTA (AP) — Two men have been kicked out of the Army National Guard after liberal activists uncovered their membership in a religious group with white supremacist ties.

Brandon Trent East told The Atlanta Journal-Constitution that the Alabama National Guard sent him a separation notice on Dec. 14.

A spokeswoman for the Georgia National Guard said Dalton Woodward is no longer a member. She declined to comment on the terms of Woodward's separation.

Woodward didn't respond to a request for comment left with his friend East.

Earlier in 2019, the Atlanta Antifacists group published a report saying East and Woodward were leaders of the Norse pagan group Ravensblood Kindred. The group is part of the Asatru Folk Assembly, which researchers say endorses white supremacy.

Haralson County Sheriff Eddie Mixon earlier forced East to resign as a jailer.

When the report was published, Woodward was on active duty in Afghanistan.

Woodward's unit returned from deployment in June and an investigation into his connections with white supremacy concluded in October.

The military has struggled in recent years to root out members of white supremacist organizations or sympathizers with white power causes.

A spokesman for the Alabama National Guard said East has 45 days to contest the findings. East said the Army recommends a general discharge. That's a step down from a traditional honorable discharge, indicating unacceptable conduct not in accord with military standards.

East contends he is not a racist, and is just interested in worshipping the way his ancestors did centuries ago.

"The whole race thing started with me finding Asatru or Odinism or whatever you want to call it and seeing that as a better option than Christianity as a spirituality," he said.

East and Woodward attended a 2017 speech by white nationalist Richard Spencer at Auburn University. Photos show the men carrying signs.

"The existence of our people is not negotiable," East's sign read. Woodward's sign read, "We have a right to exist."

Both echo the so-called "14 words" motto popular among white supremacists who say non-white groups are displacing whites.

"I just went there because at the time I heard he was talking about the recent removal of Confederate monuments. That's something I wanted to hear," East said. "And it turned into a something a little worse obviously."

Along with his jailer job, East said the resulting attention has cost him other jobs, as well as friends and

family members.

He minimized his contact on social media with neo-Nazis and white supremacists. He said he stays away from those that are "Hitler worshipy."

Iraq president offers to quit after rejecting PM nominee

By QASSIM ABDUL-ZAHRA Associated Press

BAGHDAD (AP) — Iraq's president refused on Thursday to designate a prime minister candidate nominated by the Iran-backed parliamentary bloc and offered to resign, plunging the country into further political uncertainty amid nearly three months of unprecedented mass protests.

President Barham Salih said in a statement issued by his office that he would not name the governor of the southern Basra province, Asaad al-Eidani, as the country's next prime minister "to avoid more bloodshed and in order to safeguard civil peace."

Al-Eidani's name was proposed on Wednesday by the Fatah bloc, which includes leaders associated with the Iran-supported paramilitary Popular Mobilization Forces. His nomination was promptly rejected by Iraqi protesters who poured into the streets Wednesday demanding an independent candidate.

Demonstrators first took to the streets on Oct. 1 to call for the overthrow of Iraq's entire political class over corruption and mismanagement. The mass uprisings prompted the resignation of former Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi late last month. More than 450 people have been killed since October, the vast majority of them protesters killed by security forces firing tear gas and live ammunition.

Concentrated in Baghdad and the mostly Shiite-inhabited south, the protests have since evolved into an uprising against Iran's political and military influence in the country.

Salih said he was prepared to submit his resignation to Parliament, as his refusal to designate al-Eidani could be construed as a violation of the constitution. He stopped short of actually stepping down, however, saying in a statement addressed to the Parliament speaker that he would leave it up to lawmakers to decide "as they see fit." Shortly after issuing the statement, the president left Baghdad for his hometown in the northern city of Sulaimaniyah.

Under the constitution, parliament has seven days to accept or reject a president's resignation before it automatically goes into effect. It was unclear how lawmakers would react, as Salih did not officially resign.

Signaling a hardline stance, the Fatah bloc slammed Salih's decision to not name al-Eidani and called for his impeachment. "We call on parliament to take legal measures against the president for shirking his constitutional oath and breaching the constitution," it said in a statement.

In Baghdad's Tahrir Square, which has emerged as a focal point of their demonstrations, protesters gathered to celebrate the president's decision.

"This is a victory for the demonstrators and a victory for the blood of the martyrs," said activist Hasanein Gharib. "Because of street pressure, the candidate of the (political) parties was rejected, and we will not accept and we will not return to our homes if the party candidate is nominated."

According to Iraq's constitution, the largest bloc in parliament is required to nominate the new prime minister, who then has to be designated by the president. A deadline to name a new prime minister has been missed twice over disagreements on which is the largest bloc in the parliament following last year's elections.

There are two main blocs in the Iraqi Parliament: Sairoon, led by populist Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr; and Fatah, headed by Hadi al-Amiri. But the numbers in the blocs have continued to change since last year's elections, with an unknown number of lawmakers leaving some blocs and joining others.

On Saturday, Iraq's Federal Supreme Court provided guidance in a statement, but stopped short of naming the largest bloc. It said the decision should be based on parliament's first session after taking office last year. But the court also said it would accept the merger of two or more lists to become the largest bloc. The same day, President Salih sent the court's response to parliament, asking the legislature to say which is the largest bloc.

A Facebook page close to al-Sadr commented on the president's position saying: "Thank you, Mr. Presi-

dent, for rejecting the candidates that the people reject, a position that history, and the (Iraqi) people and the (Shiite religious) authority will record.”

—
This story has been edited to correct the spelling of the president’s last name.

Police release teen suspect in Barnard student’s killing

By MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A 14-year-old boy suspected of fatally stabbing a Barnard College freshman was released from police custody on Thursday, mere hours after New York City police said he had been located following a two-week manhunt.

Chief of Detectives Rodney Harrison tweeted that finding the suspect “was a significant development in the investigative process,” but that the youth had since been released to the custody of his lawyers. Harrison didn’t say why the boy was released.

A police spokesman declined to provide details, saying “the investigation remains active and ongoing.”

A spokesman for Neighborhood Defender Service confirmed that the organization is providing the boy with legal representation but declined to comment further.

The 14-year-old is one of three youths police believe were involved in the stabbing of 18-year-old Tessa Majors as she walked through Manhattan’s Morningside Park on Dec. 11.

Police tracked him down after taking the unusual step last Friday of releasing photographs of him but not his name or any other identifying information.

Harrison announced in a tweet Thursday morning that the boy had been found, but a police spokeswoman declined to answer questions about where and how he was located.

Of the two other suspects, only one has been charged.

A 13-year-old boy arrested Dec. 13 and charged as a juvenile with felony murder told detectives he was at the park with the other youths but wasn’t the one who stabbed Majors, police said.

Another juvenile suspect was questioned for several hours, also on Dec. 13, but police let him go, Harrison said. He has declined to say why that boy wasn’t charged.

Majors was stabbed while walking in the park just before 7 p.m., two days before the start of final exams at Barnard, an all-women’s school that is part of the Ivy League’s Columbia University.

She staggered up a flight of stairs to street level and collapsed in a crosswalk.

Her death has troubled city and college leaders, both for its proximity to campus and its apparent randomness.

Some city leaders have urged police to use caution in investigating Majors’ death to avoid repeating mistakes made with the Central Park Five — a group of five black and Hispanic teens wrongfully convicted of a 1989 rape.

Harrison said in a tweet that the youth taken into custody Thursday had lawyers present “for the entire investigative process.”

At a press conference last week, he said the youths previously questioned in the Majors case had guardians present and were told of their right to a lawyer.

The Legal Aid Society, which represents the first arrested youth, said detectives should have waited until he had a lawyer before questioning him.

The organization has also raised concerns about the track record of one of the detectives in the case, saying Wilfredo Acevedo had been the subject of disciplinary findings and was accused in lawsuits of planting and falsifying evidence, lying in court papers and using excessive force.

Police Commissioner Dermot Shea defended Acevedo, saying in a written statement that he had never been found to have made a single false statement or falsely arrested anyone by the NYPD, the city’s police watchdog agency, courts or prosecutors.

Shea said the Legal Aid Society was “trying to undermine the case” by singling out Acevedo with “calculated, personal attacks.”

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In the wake of Majors' death, Barnard and Columbia faculty have reported receiving "abhorrent and viciously racist" robocall messages from a white supremacist organization, and a Connecticut man was arrested after police say he posted online that he was going to kill the suspected stabber.

Majors played in a rock band, sported green hair and had told an editor from a newspaper internship in high school that she planned to take journalism classes in college.

She was memorialized Saturday at a private service at her high school in Charlottesville, Virginia. St. Anne's Head of School David Lourie told mourners that being around Majors left everyone feeling "more optimistic about the future."

Follow Michael Sisak on Twitter at twitter.com/mikesisak

Simone Soars: Biles named 2019 AP Female Athlete of the Year

By WILL GRAVES AP Sports Writer

They're called "Simone Things," a catchall phrase for the casual ease with which Simone Biles seems to soar through her sport and her life.

The irony, of course, is that there's nothing casual or easy about it. Any of it. The greatest gymnast of all time and 2019 Associated Press Female Athlete of the Year only makes it seem that way.

Those jaw-dropping routines that are rewriting her sport's code of points and redefining what can be done on the competition floor? Born from a mix of natural talent, hard work and a splash of ego.

The 25 world championship medals, the most by any gymnast ever? The result of a promise the 22-year-old made to herself when she returned to competition in 2017 after taking time off following her golden run at the 2016 Olympics.

The stoicism and grace she has shown in becoming an advocate for survivors — herself included — and an agent for change in the wake of the Larry Nassar sexual abuse scandal that's shaken USA Gymnastics to its core? The byproduct of a conscious decision to embrace the immense clout she carries.

"I realize now with the platform I have it will be powerful if I speak up and speak for what I believe in," Biles told The Associated Press. "It's an honor to speak for those that are less fortunate. So if I can be a voice for them in a positive manner, then of course I'm going to do whatever I can."

And it's that mission — combined with her otherworldly skill and boundless charisma — that's enabled Biles to keep gymnastics in the spotlight, a rarity for a sport that typically retreats into the background once the Olympic flame goes out. She is the first gymnast to be named AP Female Athlete of the Year twice and the first to do it in a non-Olympic year.

Biles edged U.S. women's soccer star Megan Rapinoe in a vote by AP member sports editors and AP beat writers. Skiing star Mikaela Schiffrin placed third, with WNBA MVP Elena Delle Donne fourth. Biles captured the award in 2016 following a showstopping performance at the Rio de Janeiro Olympics, where she won five medals in all, four of them gold. She spent most of the following 12 months taking a break before returning to the gym in the fall of 2017, saying she owed it to herself to mine the depth of her talent.

Check social media following one of her routines and you'll find people -- from LeBron James to Michelle Obama to Chrissy Teigen -- struggling to distill what they've witnessed into 280 characters or fewer, with whatever they settle on typically followed by multiple exclamation points and a goat emoji, a nod to Biles being considered the Greatest Of All Time.

Her triple-twisting double-flip (the "triple double") at the end of her first tumbling pass on floor exercise is a wondrous blur. Her double-twisting double-flip beam dismount (the "double double") is so tough the International Gymnastics Federation made the unusual decision to downplay its value in an effort to deter other gymnasts from even trying it.

This is both the blessing and the curse of making the nearly impossible look tantalizingly attainable. When Biles learned about the FIG's decision, she vented on Twitter, her palpable frustration highlighting the realness she's maintained even as her first name has become synonymous with her sport's royalty.

It can lead to a bit of a balancing act. In some ways, she's still the kid from Texas who just wants to

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hang out with her boyfriend and her dog and go to the grocery store without being bothered. In other ways, she's trying to be respectful of the world she's built.

Take the GOAT thing. It's a title she embraces — Biles wore a goat-themed leotard during training at the national championships in August — but also takes with a grain of salt, determined to stay grounded even as the hype around her grows. Yes, GOAT happens to be the acronym for her planned post-Olympic "Gold Over America Tour," but ask her where the inspiration came from and she laughs and gives credit to a friend, Kevin, who came up with it in a group chat. It is both paying tribute to and winking at her status at the same time.

Biles has become well aware over the last three years that her every word and action carries far greater weight than she ever imagined. Her most impactful moment of 2019 might not have come during a meet but sitting for an interview on the eve of winning her record sixth national title, when she fought back tears while talking about how USA Gymnastics, the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee and the FBI failed to protect athletes during an investigation into Nassar's abusive behavior.

The moment went viral, as most things surrounding her tend to do these days.

"I'm starting to realize it's not just the gymnetnet anymore," Biles said, using the term for her sport's dedicated fans. "It's an overall thing. It's weird to get that kind of attention, but at the end of the day, I feel gymnastics has been overlooked in non-Olympic years. Yeah, it puts pressure on me. But I'm not trying to think about all the attention from the outside world."

The attention figures to only grow in the run-up to Tokyo, where she will attempt to become the first female gymnast in more than half a century to repeat as Olympic champion. Her smiling face serves as the exclamation point at the end of every television promo for the Summer Games.

Let it be known: The smile is real. That might not have always been the case, but it is now. Heading into the final months of a singular career, she is trying to revel in the journey while anxiously awaiting what's next. Add it to the list of Simone Things.

"I feel like this is the beginning of my life and I don't want gymnastics to be my whole entire life," she said. "I'm definitely going to soak in the moment and enjoy it so 10 years from now I can look back and say 'I had the time of my life out there' ... rather than 'I was good, but I was miserable.'"

More AP sports <https://apnews.com/apf-sports> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

Daycare owner arrested after 26 kids found behind false wall

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. (AP) — A Colorado woman accused of hiding 26 children behind a false wall at her daycare center was arrested for investigation of misdemeanor child abuse, police said Thursday.

Carla Faith, 58, was arrested Monday in Colorado Springs on suspicion of two counts of reckless child abuse without injury and a single count of trying to influence a public servant, the El Paso County court records show.

Three employees — Katelynne Nelson, 31, Christina Swauger, 35, and Valerie Fresquez, 24 — were arrested on related charges.

Faith was arrested after a six-week investigation by the city police department's Crimes Against Children Unit, Lt. James Sokolik said in a statement. She posted \$3,000 bond Wednesday. Her next court appearance was set for Jan. 2.

Police went to the Play Mountain Place site on Nov. 13 after receiving complaints that the business was housing more children than its license allowed.

Officers found Faith at a home on the property. After hearing noise downstairs, the officers discovered a false wall and said they discovered two adults and the children, all under 3, in the basement.

Faith had told a human services worker that same day that no children were at the facility, even though a mother reported leaving her child there, according to an arrest warrant affidavit obtained by The Gazette.

Faith also told police there was no basement and that children were away at a park, according to the affidavit. It said police found toddlers with soiled or wet diapers.

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Police didn't suggest that anyone was being held against their will.

Play Mountain Place had been authorized to care for six children, The Gazette reported. The state Department of Human Services has suspended its license.

In November, the department ordered Faith to close three other Colorado Springs daycare facilities — one of them licensed. It said it was investigating their operations as well.

Attempts to reach Faith by telephone at Play Mountain Place and through the state public defender's office weren't successful Thursday. Public defenders do not comment on pending cases.

Swauger was arrested for investigation of the same counts faced by Faith. She posted \$3,000 bond on Tuesday. It was unclear if she had an attorney.

Nelson posted \$1,000 bond following her arrest on suspicion of misdemeanor child abuse without injury and a felony count of possession of a controlled substance. She was represented by a public defender.

Fresquez faces a possible misdemeanor child abuse count and was released, Sokolik said. It wasn't known if she had an attorney.

Markets in 2019: record stocks, lower rates, so-so IPOs

By ALEX VEIGA Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — On January 3, the S&P 500 sank 2.5% when Apple warned of sagging demand for the iPhone, an inauspicious start to 2019 following a 14% drubbing in last year's fourth quarter.

On January 4, Federal Reserve Chairman Jay Powell said the central bank would be "patient" with its interest rate policy following four increases in 2018. The S&P 500 soared 3.4% and by the end of the month was up nearly 8%.

January's swing helped set the tone for a year in which the market responded to every downturn with a more sustained upswing. Along the way, stocks kept setting records — 32 of them for the S&P 500 by Dec. 20, and 19 for the Dow Jones Industrial Average.

By its final policy meeting in December, the Fed had completely reversed course and cut rates three times in what Powell called a pre-emptive move against any impact a sluggish global economy and the U.S.-China trade war might have on U.S. economic growth. The stock market, and most Fed observers not named Trump, approved of the Fed's actions.

Investors' uncertainty over trade policy eased by December as Washington and Beijing reached a modest, interim agreement that averted a new round of tariffs on \$160 billion worth of Chinese imports and reduced existing import taxes on about \$112 billion in other Chinese goods.

While the pact left unresolved some of the thorniest issues between the two countries, investors appeared happy to have a de-escalation in trade tensions now and push off lingering concerns until 2020.

Through it all, the U.S. economy and consumers' appetite for spending remained resilient, supporting the market's record-shattering, year-end rally.

ALMOST EVERYTHING'S A WINNER

Investments around the world were winners in 2019 as central banks unleashed more stimulus to bolster the global economy against the damage created by President Donald Trump's trade war. Not only did U.S. stocks rise, so did high-quality bonds, low-quality bonds and foreign stocks. Among the few losers: junk bonds with the very lowest credit ratings, but a better performance from bonds with bad but not the worst ratings meant high-yield indexes still generally made gains.

KEEPS ON TICKING

The U.S. economy withstood a number of challenges in 2019. President Trump's trade war with China intensified as both sides increased tariffs. Fears of recession spiked in late summer and fall as exports fell and businesses, facing higher costs on imported goods, cut back spending on new machinery and equipment. Overseas economies also stumbled, with Germany nearly falling into recession and growth in the U.K. slowing amid Brexit uncertainty. Still, the U.S. consumer kept spending as the unemployment rate hit a 50-year low and wage growth picked up for workers outside managerial ranks. Most economists

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expect modest growth in 2020.

MIXED REVIEWS

For initial public offerings, 2019 was like a year in Hollywood: There were some phenomenal successes and some notable flops. Ride-hailing giant Uber and rival Lyft were huge disappointments. Video-conference company Zoom and workplace messaging company Slack each soared on their first day of trading, but while Zoom kept zooming Slack, well, slacked off after that. For non-tech companies, Beyond Meat and its plant-based burgers hit the spot while SmileDirectClub produced mostly frowns. WeWork's botched IPO signaled a change in IPO investors' mindset.

TECH IS CHIPPER

Technology stocks soared in 2019 and far outpaced every other sector in the S&P 500. Chipmakers, including Advanced Micro Devices and Lam Research, made some of the biggest gains, despite a trade war that threatened business in China. Apple and Microsoft had their biggest share gains in a decade and each topped \$1 trillion in market value. Energy stocks gained the least amid concerns that oil supply is outpacing demand.

EARNINGS EASE UP

Corporate profits hit the brakes in 2019, a year after a big tax cut helped juice results. On top of no longer getting the benefit of the first year of lower tax rates, a slowing global economy weighed on company revenues. If S&P 500 companies end up reporting four straight quarters of declines for 2019, as analysts expect, it would be the first time that's happened since 2015-16. Still, analysts tend to set low expectations that most companies are able to beat, so investors aren't panicked by the slower profit growth.

CAN NEGATIVE BE A POSITIVE?

Would you pay someone to lend money to them? The practice has become more common around the world — \$13 trillion in bonds globally had negative yields as of November, according to Deutsche Bank. Much of that total is from Japan, France and Germany, countries that account for nearly a quarter of all the world's bonds. It's the result of shock-therapy by the European Central Bank and others to try to jolt their economies and inflation higher.

THE FED'S U-TURN

The Federal Reserve changed course on interest rate policy this year, cutting its benchmark rate three times after more than two years of increases. Chairman Jerome Powell portrayed those cuts as "insurance" against a slowdown resulting from weak global growth. Prior to late 2015, the Fed had been keeping rates at a record low near zero to stimulate the economy. In December, the Fed said it was prepared to keep rates low at least through next year.

"HOME" RUN

A strong labor market and a steady decline in mortgage rates stoked demand among would-be homeowners this year, driving U.S. home sales higher. A persistently limited supply of previously occupied homes for sale at a time when millennials are increasingly seeking to become homeowners also helped to stoke demand, even though affordability remained a challenge in many markets. The housing trends favored U.S. homebuilders, whose shares surged well above the broader market.

CLICKS AGAIN OUTSHINE BRICKS

Retailers had a mixed year as they continued beefing up their online sales strategies amid declining foot traffic. Department stores, and Macy's in particular, fell sharply. Specialty retailers did much better, with electronics retailer Best Buy, car dealership chain CarMax and home improvement retailers Home Depot

and Lowe's among those making sharp gains. As the year wound down, retailers were hoping that low unemployment, higher wages and the record-setting stock market would translate into a robust holiday shopping season.

PROTEIN PUSH

Plant-based meat has gone mainstream. Beyond Meat, which makes burgers and sausages from pea protein, had one of the most successful IPOs of the year. Burger King's soy-based Impossible Whopper was a big hit. Tyson Foods, Nestle and Kellogg all introduced plant-based meats. Health and animal welfare concerns are driving the trend. U.S. plant-based meat sales jumped 10% this year, to nearly \$1 billion; traditional meat sales rose 2% to \$95 billion in that same time, Nielsen says.

Stan Choe, Seth Sutel, Paul Harloff, Damian Troise, Dee-Ann Durbin, Chris Rugaber and graphics artist Joseph Paschke contributed to this report.

Los Angeles prosecutors reviewing 8 cases against Weinstein

By STEFANIE DAZIO Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Prosecutors in Los Angeles are reviewing eight cases accusing disgraced film mogul Harvey Weinstein of sexual assault, an official said Thursday.

The Los Angeles and Beverly Hills police departments each brought four investigations to prosecutors, according to Ricardo Santiago, a spokesman for the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office.

The office will decide whether to move forward with prosecution. No charges have been filed, Santiago said. He did not know details about the allegations or when the cases were presented to prosecutors.

Juda Engelmayer, Weinstein's publicist, said he had "nothing to add right now" in an email to The Associated Press.

District Attorney Jackie Lacey created a task force more than two years ago to handle the surge in sexual misconduct allegations against entertainment figures after the accusations against Weinstein launched the #MeToo movement. He has denied allegations of nonconsensual sex.

No charges have been filed against 22 men — including Weinstein, actor Kevin Spacey, director James Toback and former CBS CEO Leslie Moonves — who were the focus of the task force's investigations. All of them have denied wrongdoing.

Charges have already been rejected for most, mainly because the statute of limitations had expired or there was insufficient evidence.

Dozens of women, including actresses Gwyneth Paltrow, Angelina Jolie, Lupita Nyong'o and Ashley Judd, have accused Weinstein of sexual harassment, while actresses Asia Argento, Rose McGowan and others have accused the Oscar winner of raping them.

Weinstein is scheduled to stand trial Jan. 6 in New York on charges he raped a woman in a Manhattan hotel room in 2013 and performed a forcible sex act on a different woman in 2006. He has pleaded not guilty and says any sexual activity was consensual.

A tentative global settlement reached this month would split \$25 million among more than two dozen of Weinstein's accusers. The deal wouldn't require him to pay anything out of his own pocket and he wouldn't have to admit wrongdoing.

Last week, a former model who accused him of sexually abusing her when she was 16 filed a new lawsuit, saying the tentative settlement wasn't "fair or just." Kaja Sokola sued under New York's Child Victims Act, which gives people a one-year window to sue over sexual abuse that they say they endured as children.

Beginning Jan. 1, California will suspend for three years the statute of limitations for victims of childhood sexual abuse to file lawsuits.

The Associated Press does not typically identify people who say they are victims of sexual assault but the women gave their permission.

Associated Press writer Michael R. Sisak in New York City contributed.

California jails use kinder approach to solitary confinement

By **DON THOMPSON** Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — An inmate in solitary confinement at a California jail was refusing to leave his cell. The jailers' usual response: Send an "extraction team" of corrections officers to burst into the cell and drag him out.

But not in Contra Costa County, one of three in the state using a kinder, gentler approach in response to inmate lawsuits, a policy change that experts say could be a national model for reducing the use of isolation cells.

So the inmate was asked: "What if we gave you a couple extra cookies and another sandwich? Would you move?" recalled Don Specter, the nonprofit Prison Law Office director who negotiated the new policies. "He said yes. ... They were like, 'Wow.'"

More than a quarter of U.S. states and numerous smaller jurisdictions are looking for ways to reduce the use of solitary confinement, according to the Vera Institute of Justice, which encourages alternatives to a practice behavioral experts say is dehumanizing and can worsen mental illness.

The new policies in California came after Specter's firm sued seven of California's 58 counties, alleging that conditions had grown inhumane as jails absorbed inmates who previously would have served their sentences in state prisons. The state in 2011 began sending less serious offenders to local jails for years at a time to ease crowding in state penitentiaries.

Some jurisdictions nationwide are banning isolation for young offenders, pregnant women or those with mental health diagnoses. The California counties' approach of generally limiting it to those who engage in continued violent behavior has dramatically reduced the number of inmates in isolation and the length of time they stay there.

Contra Costa started 2019 with about 100 people in solitary, most for more than a year. It had just three in isolation cells by December, after officials began using the new approach.

Sacramento County also is following the policy pioneered by Santa Clara County, while Fresno County is considering it. Among other things, it encourages the use of low-cost incentives to reward good behavior, like the opportunity to listen to the radio, watch a movie or get an extra snack.

Sacramento County has cut its isolated population roughly in half, to about 60 inmates, said Lt. Alex McCamy: "It's a limited time frame and a limited group, but the initial impression is positive."

Rick Raemisch, who restricted the use of solitary confinement when he headed Colorado's prison system, said the violent, tense, dirty conditions in Santa Clara County's jail improved markedly with the new policy.

"Think of yourself being in a cell the size of a parking space for 23 hours a day," said Raemisch, who consulted with county officials. "At a minimum you're going to get angry, and when you get angry you're going to fight back."

Inmates nationwide are most often segregated for nonviolent "nuisance infractions" like smoking, cursing, disobeying orders or having unauthorized items from the commissary, said the Vera Institute's Sara Sullivan.

Santa Clara County once locked a woman in solitary confinement for 2 1/2 years for talking back to correctional officers or yelling and banging on her cell door with other detainees, according to Specter's lawsuit.

The California counties' new policy of restricting its use to continued violent behavior could be seen as a national pilot program, Sullivan said.

New Jersey's Middlesex County Adult Correction Center has lowered the number of isolated inmates and the time they spend there, she said, but with a different approach that lets inmates out of their cells more frequently.

The Hampden County Correctional Center in Massachusetts increased its use of alternative sanctions and positive reinforcement. And Cook County, Illinois, no longer keeps troublesome inmates in isolation, allowing them to regularly spend time with about a half-dozen other inmates.

"There's been a decades-long effort to reform solitary, especially in prisons. But what we haven't seen is

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a paired reform effort for jails," said Amy Fettig, director of the American Civil Liberty Union's Stop Solitary campaign. "In Santa Clara what we're seeing is an attempt to reform the whole process."

Long-term isolation can be so debilitating, Fettig said, that she's had clients cut themselves "just to feel something because they've become numb."

Santa Clara County, home to San Jose and Silicon Valley, once had 400 inmates in solitary confinement. Specter's client in Santa Clara County had been in solitary confinement for nearly five years.

By last fall there were about 40 inmates confined to isolation cells for an average of about two months, and just 26 by December.

Santa Clara County Sheriff Laurie Smith said she and many deputies were initially skeptical.

"It has surprised me, and I think it's very, very good for our inmates," she said. "I think what we're doing is correct, and I think it's working."

Smith said she remains concerned that assaults on staff are up. She said the increase is logical, however, since inmates locked in their cells virtually around the clock have little opportunity to assault anyone.

Sgt. Todd Kendrick, president of the county's correctional officers association, attributed the increase to other less restrictive jail policies as well as the easing of solitary confinement. He and Smith both called for increased staffing.

Smith said the county fell into a pattern of protectively isolating inmates to separate purported gang members and those charged with murder and to safeguard jailhouse informants or sex offenders for fear they would be harmed. Officials sought to improve after several major incidents, including deaths in custody.

Like most jails, three-quarters or more of inmates had not been convicted of a crime and yet spent months and sometimes years awaiting trial in isolation. Under the new policy, "it's really our philosophy to use that when it's absolutely necessary, when there's extraordinary risk," Smith said.

Jail employees work to get inmates out of segregation as quickly as possible, often using a system in which inmates agree, in writing, not to assault each other.

One inmate refused for 1½ years to leave solitary because he had testified against other gang members, recalled Capt. Thomas Duran, who coordinates the program.

But he saw other longtime inmates leaving segregation and eventually agreed to try it. Rather than put him immediately in with other inmates, deputies paired him with a single inmate — then two other inmates, then four and so on.

He spent more and more time out of his solitary cell until he was fully back into the general jail population.

"We're trying to set the inmates up not to fail," Duran said.

Ari Behn, Spacey accuser and ex of Norwegian princess, dies

By PHILIP MARCELO Associated Press

Scandinavian writer Ari Behn — the ex-husband of Norwegian Princess Martha Louise and among the people who had accused actor Kevin Spacey of sexual misconduct — died this week, his manager said. He was 47.

Behn died by suicide Wednesday, his manager told the Norwegian news service NTB. Authorities said he was found at his home in Norway.

The Norwegian royal family said in a written statement that Behn was "an important part of our family for many years and we carry warm and good memories of him with us."

Behn, who was Danish-born, and Martha Louise, the oldest daughter of Norway's King Harald and Queen Sonja, were married for 14 years. The couple divorced in 2017 and have three children.

The match had critics before it even became official. Negative coverage dogged Behn after a Las Vegas travelogue he hosted on Norwegian TV in the early 2000s briefly showed him around prostitutes, some of them using cocaine.

Behn said at the time that it was mere reporting, not endorsement, and Martha Louise defended him.

Behn also wrote books and plays, including 1999's "Trist som faen," or "Sad as Hell," a short story collection that was translated into several languages.

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In 2017, Behn accused Spacey of groping him under the table at a Nobel Peace Prize concert in Oslo a decade earlier. It didn't appear that Behn ever pursued criminal charges or a lawsuit against Spacey.

Spacey didn't comment on the allegations at the time, which came amid a string of similar accusations. A lawyer for Spacey didn't respond to an email seeking comment Thursday.

Behn's death came a day after Spacey, 60, released a YouTube video in which he pretends to be Frank Underwood, the scheming politician he played in the Netflix series "House of Cards." He did not address the cascade of allegations against him.

Spacey was dropped from "Cards" after several people stepped forward with allegations of sexual misconduct. The final season aired last year.

Massachusetts prosecutors this year dropped a criminal case alleging the Oscar winner groped an 18-year-old man at a bar on the resort island of Nantucket in 2016. The unnamed accuser in that case invoked his Fifth Amendment right not to testify about text messages from the night of the alleged encounter.

Police in London have also said they are investigating allegations of sexual misconduct by Spacey, but there has been no public update on that inquiry for months.

Los Angeles prosecutors this year tossed a sexual battery charge against Spacey after the unnamed accuser in that case died.

Another player in the Spacey saga, Linda Culkin, was fatally struck crossing the street in Quincy, Massachusetts, in May.

The former nursing assistant had pleaded guilty to sending death threats and bomb threats to Spacey and his associates. She was sentenced to over four years in federal prison in 2014.

Prosecutors said at the time that Culkin became obsessed with Spacey after a patient told her of being attacked by him.

Marcelo reported from Boston. Associated Press video journalist David Keyton in Stockholm, Sweden, contributed to this report.

States are on front lines of 2020 election-security efforts

By CHRISTINA A. CASSIDY Associated Press

SPRINGFIELD, Va. (AP) — Inside a hotel ballroom near the nation's capital, a U.S. Army officer with battlefield experience told 120 state and local election officials that they may have more in common with military strategists than they might think.

These government officials are on the front lines of a different kind of battlefield — one in which they are helping to defend American democracy by ensuring free and fair elections.

"Everyone in this room is part of a bigger effort, and it's only together are we going to get through this," the officer said.

That officer and other past and present national security leaders had a message to convey to officials from 24 states gathered for a recent training held by a Harvard-affiliated democracy project: They are the linchpins in efforts to defend U.S. elections from an attack by Russia, China or other foreign threats, and developing a military mindset will help them protect the integrity of the vote.

The need for such training reflects how elections security worries have heightened in the aftermath of the 2016 election, when Russian military agents targeted voting systems across the country as part of a multi-pronged effort to influence the presidential election. Until then, the job of local election officials could have been described as akin to a wedding planner who keeps track of who will be showing up on Election Day and ensures all the equipment and supplies are in place.

Now, these officials are on the front lines. The federal government will be on high alert, gathering intelligence and scanning systems for suspicious cyber activity as they look to defend the nation's elections. Meanwhile, it will be the state and county officials who will be on the ground charged with identifying and dealing with any hostile acts.

"It's another level of war," said Jesse Salinas, the chief elections official in Yolo County, California, who

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attended the training. "You only attack things that you feel are a threat to you, and our democracy is a threat to a lot of these nation-states that are getting involved trying to undermine it. We have to fight back, and we have to prepare."

Salinas brought four of his employees with him to the training, which was part of the Defending Digital Democracy Project based at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at the Harvard Kennedy School. The group has been working actively with former and current military, national security, political and communications experts — many of whom dedicate their time after work and on weekends — to develop training and manuals for state and local election officials. Those involved with leading the training asked for anonymity because of their sensitive positions.

The project's latest playbook focuses on bringing military best practices to running Election Day operations, encouraging state and local election officials to adopt a "battle staff" command structure with clear responsibilities and standard operating procedures for dealing with minor issues. The project is also providing officials with a free state-of-the-art incident tracking system.

Eric Rosenbach, co-director of the Belfer Center and a former U.S. Army intelligence officer who served as chief of staff to Defense Secretary Ash Carter in the Obama administration, told the group gathered for the training that it "shouldn't be lost on you that this is a very military-like model."

"Let's be honest about it," Rosenbach said. "If democracy is under attack and you guys are the ones at the pointy end of the spear, why shouldn't we train that way? Why shouldn't we try to give you the help that comes with that model and try to build you up and do all we can?"

Instructors stressed the need for election officials to be on the lookout for efforts to disrupt the vote and ensure that communications are flowing up from counties to the state, down from states to the counties, as well as up and down to the federal government and across states.

Piecing together seemingly disparate actions happening in real-time across geographical locations will allow the nation to defend itself, said Robby Mook, Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton's campaign manager in 2016. Mook founded the Defending Digital Democracy Project with Rosenbach and Matt Rhoades, Republican nominee Mitt Romney's 2012 campaign manager.

"Find a way to input data in a consistent, efficient and reliable way to ensure you know what is going on and prevent things from falling through the cracks," Mook told the election officials. "You got to rise above just putting out fires."

At the training were officials from California, Colorado, Georgia, North Carolina, Oregon, Tennessee, West Virginia and other states. In one exercise, election officials were paired up as either a state or county under an Election Day scenario, charged with logging incidents and trying to piece together what turned out to be four different coordinated campaigns to disrupt voting.

"One of the big takeaways was just how the lack of one piece of information moving up from the counties to the state or moving from the states to counties, if either of those things don't happen, it can have a significant impact," said Stephen Trout, elections director for Oregon.

Trout said he would move quickly to acquire, customize and implement the incident tracking system, which would be an upgrade from the paper process currently in use. Dave Tackett, chief information officer for the West Virginia Secretary of State's Office, said he will recommend some structuring changes at his state operations center, including bringing key personnel into the room and incorporating elements of the incident tracking system like mapping and the ability to assign people to specific incidents.

"Events like today are helping us zero in on how to structure ourselves better, how to really think in a different mindset so that we can carry out all the different tasks that have to be done with elections," said Karen Brinson Bell, executive director of the North Carolina Board of Elections. "(It's) the importance of communications, the importance of having standard operating procedures in place so all the i's are dotted and the t's crossed ahead of time and you are prepared for the unknown."

Follow Christina Almeida Cassidy on Twitter at http://twitter.com/AP_Christina.

West Coast fishery rebounds in rare conservation 'home run'

By GILLIAN FLACCUS Associated Press

WARRENTON, Ore. (AP) — A rare environmental success story is unfolding in waters off the U.S. West Coast.

After years of fear and uncertainty, bottom trawler fishermen — those who use nets to scoop up rockfish, bocaccio, sole, Pacific Ocean perch and other deep-dwelling fish — are making a comeback here, reinventing themselves as a sustainable industry less than two decades after authorities closed huge stretches of the Pacific Ocean because of the species' depletion.

The ban devastated fishermen, but on Jan. 1, regulators will reopen an area roughly three times the size of Rhode Island off Oregon and California to groundfish bottom trawling — all with the approval of environmental groups that were once the industry's biggest foes. The two sides collaborated on a long-term plan that will continue to resuscitate the groundfish industry while permanently protecting thousands of square miles of reefs and coral beds that benefit the overfished species.

Now, the fishermen who see their livelihood returning must solve another piece of the puzzle: drumming up consumer demand for fish that haven't been in grocery stores or on menus for a generation.

"It's really a conservation home run," said Shems Jud, regional director for the Environmental Defense Fund's ocean program. "The recovery is decades ahead of schedule. It's the biggest environmental story that no one knows about."

The process also netted a win for conservationists concerned about the future of extreme deepwater habitats where bottom trawlers currently don't go. A tract of ocean the size of New Mexico with waters up to 2.1 miles (3.4 kilometers) deep will be off-limits to bottom-trawling to protect deep-sea corals and sponges just now being discovered.

"Not all fishermen are rapers of the environment. When you hear the word 'trawler,' very often that's associated with destruction of the sea and pillaging," said Kevin Dunn, whose trawler Iron Lady was featured in a Whole Foods television commercial about sustainable fishing.

Groundfish is a catch-all term that refers to dozens of species that live on, or near, the bottom of the Pacific off the West Coast. Trawling vessels drag weighted nets to collect as many fish as possible, but that can damage critical rocky underwater habitat.

The groundfish fishery hasn't always struggled. Starting in 1976, the federal government subsidized the construction of domestic fishing vessels to lock down U.S. interests in West Coast waters, and by the 1980s, that investment paid off. Bottom trawling was booming, with 500 vessels in California, Oregon and Washington hauling in 200 million pounds (91 million kilograms) of non-whiting groundfish a year. Unlike Dungeness crab and salmon, groundfish could be harvested year-round, providing an economic backbone for ports.

But in the late 1990s, scientists began to sound the alarm about dwindling fish stocks.

Just nine of the more than 90 groundfish species were in trouble, but because of the way bottom trawlers fished — indiscriminately hauling up millions of pounds of whatever their nets encountered — regulators focused on all bottom trawling. Multiple species of rockfish, slow-growing creatures with spiny fins and colorful names like canary, darkblotched and yellow eye, were the hardest hit.

By 2005, trawlers brought in just one-quarter of the haul of the 1980s. The fleet is now down to 75 boats, said Brad Pettinger, former director of the Oregon Trawl Commission who was key in developing the plan to reopen fishing grounds.

"We really wiped out the industry for a number of years," Pettinger said. "To get those things up and going again is not easy."

In 2011, trawlers were assigned quotas for how many of each species they could catch. If they went over, they had to buy quota from other fishermen in a system reminiscent of a carbon cap-and-trade model. Mandatory independent observers, paid by the trawlers, accompanied the vessels and hand-counted their haul.

Fishermen quickly learned to avoid areas heavy in off-limits species and began innovating to net fewer

banned fish.

Surveys soon showed groundfish rebounding — in some cases, 50 years faster than predicted — and accidental trawling of overfished species fell by 80%. The Marine Stewardship Council certified 13 species in the fishery as sustainable in 2014, and five more followed last year.

As the quota system's success became apparent, environmentalists and trawlers began to talk. Regulators would soon revisit the trawling rules, and the two sides wanted a voice.

They met more than 30 times, slowly building trust as they crafted a proposal. Trawlers brought maps developed over generations, alerted environmentalists to reefs they didn't know about, and even shared proprietary tow paths.

"All we could do on our end is make a good-faith offer, and I really credit the guys in the industry for taking that up," said Seth Atkinson, an attorney with the nonprofit Natural Resources Defense Council. "These were tough compromises."

Last year, regulators approved a plan to reopen the 17-year-old Rockfish Conservation Area off Oregon and California, while banning future trawling in extreme-depth waters and making off-limits some habitat dubbed essential to fish reproduction, including a large area off Southern California.

"A fair number of fishermen thought it was a good deal and if it was going to happen, it was better for them to participate than not," said Tom Libby, a fish processor who was instrumental in crafting the agreement. "It's right up there with the best and most rewarding things in my career — and I've been at it 50 years."

Some groups, like Oceana, wanted even more protections from bottom trawling, which it calls the "most damaging fishing method to seafloor habitats off the West Coast." In a news release, the group emphasized that the agreement it did get safeguards 90 percent of the seafloor in U.S. waters off the West Coast.

Even so, with fragile species rebounding, trawlers could harvest as much as 120 million pounds (54 million kilograms) a year, but there's only demand for about half that much. That's because groundfish have been replaced in stores by farmed, foreign species like tilapia.

A trade association called Positively Groundfish is trying to change that by touring food festivals and culinary trade shows, evangelizing to chefs and seafood buyers about the industry's rebound and newfound sustainability. They give out samples, too.

"We are treating this almost like a new product for which you have to build awareness — but we do have a great story," said Jana Hennig, the association's executive director. "People are so surprised to hear that not everything is lost, that not everything is doom and gloom, but that it's possible that you can manage a fishery so well that it actually bounces back to abundance."

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Trump warns of 'carnage' in rebel stronghold in Syria

PALM BEACH, Fla. (AP) — President Donald Trump is speaking out against the "carnage" involving thousands of civilians in a rebel stronghold in Syria.

In a tweet Thursday, Trump wrote: "Russia, Syria, and Iran are killing, or on their way to killing, thousands of innocent civilians in Idlib Province. Don't do it! Turkey is working hard to stop this carnage."

The tweet refers to an intense air and ground bombardment by government forces in southern and eastern Idlib province, the last rebel-held bastion in the country.

Syrian government forces about a month ago launched a renewed effort to take the province, which is dominated by al-Qaida-linked militants and is also home to 3 million civilians. The United Nations has warned of the growing risk of a humanitarian catastrophe along the Turkish border.

A Syrian relief group said Wednesday that more than 200,000 men, women and children fled their homes in buses, trucks and cars in recent weeks. Many have been heading toward the Turkish border for safety.

Before a ground offensive began a week ago, the U.N. reported that some 60,000 Idlib residents had already been displaced since the government's bombing campaign started late last month.

Videos posted online by activists and the opposition's Syrian Civil Defense, also known as White Helmets, showed long lines of cars, trucks and buses heading north. People carried their valuables and loaded bags and mattresses on buses.

Trump also addressed the plight of civilians in Idlib in June, accusing Russia, Syria and Iran of "indiscriminately killing many innocent civilians" in a bombing campaign. "The World is watching this butchery," he tweeted then, imploring them to "STOP!" Several months later he announced he would withdraw U.S. troops from northeastern Syria.

At each end of Pacific, skepticism over China farm purchases

By JOSH FUNK, PAUL WISEMAN and JOE McDONALD AP Business Writers

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — President Donald Trump likes to joke that America's farmers have a nice problem on their hands: They're going to need bigger tractors to keep up with surging Chinese demand for their soybeans and other agricultural goods under a preliminary deal between the world's two largest economies.

But will they really?

From Beijing to America's farm belt, skeptics are questioning just how much China has actually committed to buy — and whether U.S. farmers would be able anytime soon to export goods there in the outsize quantity that Trump has promised.

It amounts to \$40 billion a year, according to Trump's trade representative, Robert Lighthizer. If you ask the exuberant president himself, though, the total is actually "much more than" \$50 billion. To put that in perspective, U.S. farm exports to China have never topped \$26 billion in any one year.

What's more, since Trump's trade war with Beijing erupted last year, China has increased its farm purchases from Brazil, Argentina and other countries. As a result, Beijing may now be locked into contracts it couldn't break even if it intended to quickly increase its purchases of American agricultural goods to something approximating \$40 billion.

"History has never been even close to that level," said Chad Hart, an agricultural economist at Iowa State University. "There's no clear path to get us there in one year."

"The figure of \$40 billion," added Cui Fan, a trade specialist at the University of International Business and Economics in Beijing, "is larger than I expected, and I wonder whether the United States can ensure the full supply of the products."

America's farmers would surely like to. The farm belt has endured much of the impact from Beijing's retaliatory tariffs since July 2018, when the Trump administration imposed taxes on \$360 billion in Chinese imports. Beijing struck back by taxing \$120 billion in U.S. exports, including soybeans and other farm goods that are vital to many of Trump's supporters in rural America.

The impact from China's retaliatory tariffs was substantial: U.S. farm exports to China, which hit a record \$25.9 billion in 2012, plummeted last year to \$9.1 billion. Soybean exports to China fell even more — to a 12-year low of \$3.1 billion, according to the Department of Agriculture. (Farm imports to China have rebounded somewhat this year but remain well below pre-trade-war levels.)

The so-called Phase 1 deal that the two sides announced Dec. 13 did manage to de-escalate the standoff and offer at least a respite to American farmers. Yet the truce put off for future negotiations the toughest and most complex issue at the heart of the trade war: The Trump administration's assertion that Beijing cheats 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 has rejected the accusations and contended that the administration is instead trying to suppress a rising competitor in international trade.

Under the preliminary U.S.-China deal, Trump suspended his plan to impose new tariffs and reduced some existing taxes on Chinese imports. In return, Lighthizer said, China agreed to buy \$40 billion a year in U.S. farm exports over two years, among other things. (Beijing also committed to ending its long-standing

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practice of pressuring foreign companies to hand over their technology as a condition of gaining access to the Chinese market.)

Many farmers say they're hopeful but restrained in their expectations.

"At this point, we have to wait to see more details," said Jeff Jorgensen, who farms about 3,000 acres in southwest Iowa.

Yet the Trump administration has released no text of the agreement. And a fact sheet that Lighthizer's office issued didn't specify the target for increased Chinese farm purchases. What's more, Beijing has so far declined to confirm the \$40 billion figure.

"After the agreement is officially signed, the contents of the agreement will be announced to the public," said Gao Feng, a spokesman for the Commerce Ministry,

Still, Chinese imports of U.S. soybeans more than doubled in November after the Phase 1 agreement was initially announced in mid-October — a sign that reduced tensions might have begun to ease the strain on American farmers, according to AWeb.com, a news website that serves China's farming industry.

Beijing insists, though, that its farm purchases will be based on consumer demand and market prices, pointedly implying that it won't buy more than it needs just to satisfy the Trump administration's promises.

"The purchases should be based on market principles," said Tu Xinquan, director of the China Institute for WTO Studies in Beijing. "The United States should compete with other countries through price and quality."

Some analysts suggest that it's at least theoretically possible for the U.S. to boost its farm exports to China to something close to the figures the administration has promised. Flora Zhu, associate director of China corporate research at Fitch Ratings, calls the \$40 billion "achievable."

She notes, for example, that China's demand for soybeans amounts to \$40 billion a year. Even before the trade war, the U.S. supplied about a third of that total — "suggesting, Zhu said, that "there is still large room for China to increase its purchases of soybeans from the U.S."

In addition, China's demand for imported pork has intensified because its own pig herds have been decimated by an outbreak of African swine fever. Yet that same outbreak could reduce China's need for American soybeans: Fewer hogs could mean less demand for soybeans and other sources of feed.

But achieving \$40 billion a year would likely require diverting market share away from other countries — Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, New Zealand — that export sizable quantities of farm goods to China. Those nations could then argue to the World Trade Organization that they are losing exports not because they can't compete but because China is being coerced into buying American to avoid Trump's tariffs.

"It is a situation many countries are concerned about," said Tu of the WTO studies institute in Beijing.

U.S. farmers sound wary. Some worry that the prolonged trade war will brand the United States an unreliable trade partner in China and jeopardize access to a vast Chinese market that had increased its purchases of U.S. farm products from less than \$1 billion a year in the early 1990s to nearly \$26 billion by 2012. U.S. farm exports to China then fluctuated between about \$20 billion to \$25 billion a year before Trump's trade war erupted in earnest last year.

Farmers have watched with frustration as breakthroughs in the trade war appeared several times to have been achieved only to collapse soon thereafter.

"I think it's a lot of false promises again," said Bob Kuylen, who grows wheat and sunflowers and raises cattle near South Heart, North Dakota. "I'd love to see \$50 billion, but I don't think it will ever happen ... It's just almost an impossible thing, so why even say it?"

Wiseman reported from Washington and McDonald from Beijing.

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Today in History By The Associated Press

Today in History

Today is Friday, Dec. 27, the 361st day of 2019. There are four days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 27, 2001, Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld announced that Taliban and al-Qaida prisoners would be held at the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

On this date:

In 1822, scientist Louis Pasteur was born in Dole, France.

In 1831, naturalist Charles Darwin set out on a round-the-world voyage aboard the HMS Beagle.

In 1904, James Barrie's play "Peter Pan: The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up" opened at the Duke of York's Theater in London.

In 1945, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund were formally established.

In 1949, Queen Juliana of the Netherlands signed an act recognizing Indonesia's sovereignty after more than three centuries of Dutch rule.

In 1958, American physicist James Van Allen reported the discovery of a second radiation belt around Earth, in addition to one found earlier in the year.

In 1968, Apollo 8 and its three astronauts made a safe, nighttime splashdown in the Pacific.

In 1979, Soviet forces seized control of Afghanistan. President Hafizullah Amin (hah-FEE'-zoo-lah ah-MEEN'), who was overthrown and executed, was replaced by Babrak Karmal.

In 1985, Palestinian guerrillas opened fire inside the Rome and Vienna airports; 19 victims were killed, plus four attackers who were slain by police and security personnel. American naturalist Dian Fossey, 53, who had studied gorillas in the wild in Rwanda, was found hacked to death.

In 1994, four Roman Catholic priests — three French and a Belgian — were shot to death in their rectory in Algiers, a day after French commandos killed four radicals who'd hijacked an Air France jet from Algiers to Marseille.

In 1995, Israeli jeeps sped out of the West Bank town of Ramallah, capping a seven-week pullout giving Yasser Arafat control over 90 percent of the West Bank's 1 million Palestinian residents and one-third of its land.

In 2002, A defiant North Korea ordered U.N. nuclear inspectors to leave the country and said it would restart a laboratory capable of producing plutonium for nuclear weapons; the U.N. nuclear watchdog said its inspectors were "staying put" for the time being.

Ten years ago: Iranian security forces fired on Tehran protesters, killing at least eight and launching a new wave of arrests.

Five years ago: North Korea blamed its recent internet outage on the United States and hurled racially charged insults at President Barack Obama over the hacking row involving the movie "The Interview." Mehmet Ali Agca (MEH'-met AH'-lee AH'-juh), the Turkish gunman who shot and wounded John Paul II in 1981, laid white flowers on the saint's tomb in St. Peter's Basilica.

One year ago: LeBron James was selected as The Associated Press Male Athlete of the Year for the third time, after reaching the NBA Finals for the eighth consecutive year. Richard Overton, the nation's oldest living world War II veteran who was also believed to be the oldest living man in the U.S., died in Texas at the age of 112. President Donald Trump tweeted that the shooting death of a California police officer, allegedly by a man who was in the country illegally, showed the need for a border crackdown.

Today's Birthdays: Actor John Amos is 80. Rock musician Mick Jones (Foreigner) is 75. Singer Tracy Nelson is 75. Actor Gerard Depardieu is 71. Jazz singer-musician T.S. Monk is 70. Singer-songwriter Karla Bonoff is 68. Rock musician David Knopfler (Dire Straits) is 67. Actress Tovah Feldshuh is 66. Journalist-turned-politician Arthur Kent is 66. Actress Maryam D'Abo is 59. Country musician Jeff Bryant is 57. Actor Ian Gomez is 55. Actress Theresa Randle is 55. Actress Eva LaRue is 53. Wrestler and actor Bill Goldberg is 53. Actress Tracey Cherelle Jones is 50. Bluegrass singer-musician Darrin Vincent (Dailey & Vincent) is

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50. Rock musician Guthrie Govan is 48. Musician Matt Slocum is 47. Actor Wilson Cruz is 46. Singer Olu is 46. Actor Masi Oka is 45. Actor Aaron Stanford is 43. Actress Emilie de Ravin is 38. Actor Jay Ellis is 38. Christian rock musician James Mead (Kutless) is 37. Rock singer Hayley Williams (Paramore) is 31. Country singer Shay Mooney (Dan & Shay) is 28. Actor Timothee Chalamet is 24.

Thought for Today: "Man has an incurable habit of not fulfilling the prophecies of his fellow men." — Alistair Cooke, Anglo-American journalist and broadcaster (1908-2004).

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