

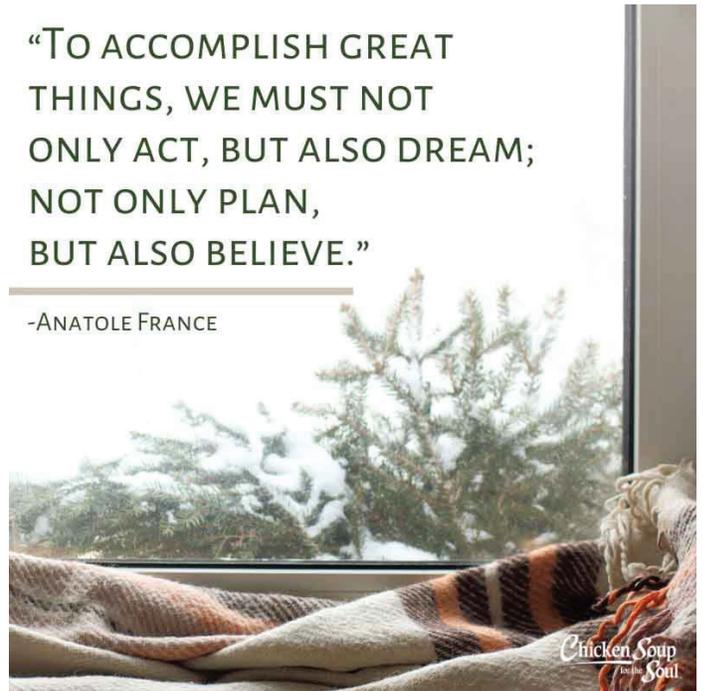
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“TO ACCOMPLISH GREAT THINGS, WE MUST NOT ONLY ACT, BUT ALSO DREAM; NOT ONLY PLAN, BUT ALSO BELIEVE.”

-ANATOLE FRANCE



Have A Great New Year!

Doug Abeln Seed Company

Doug Abeln
380-0200

2020

Latham
HI-TECH SEEDS

BECK'S

ROB-SEE-CO

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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EARTHTALK ™

Questions & Answers About Our Environment

From the Editors of E - The Environmental Magazine

Dear EarthTalk: Which companies are taking the lead in commitments to plastics reduction?

– Jason K., Reno, NV

Our modern world is literally swimming in plastic. According to Plastic Oceans International (POI), we produce over 300 million tons of plastic each year around the world, half of which is for single-use purposes. We then dump eight million tons of it into the oceans annually, where it accumulates up and down the food chain, with some settling into large, mid-ocean whirlpools of plastic waste called gyres.

Since the 1950s, we've produced upwards of 8.3 billion tons of plastic, and production is seemingly only just starting to ramp up: A recent study predicts we're on course to add another 26 billion tons to the planet's existing plastic burden by 2050 if production remains unchecked.

Weaning ourselves off plastic is going to be one of the great challenges of the 2020s. Consumer demand, along with governmental action, is forcing many companies to re-examine their manufacturing processes, supply chains and distribution networks to reduce the use of plastic in both products and packaging.

One leader is Ikea, which recently committed to transition much of its plastic packaging to a mushroom-based renewable alternative that can grow in a controlled environment, and, like plastic, be easily formed into shapes. If kept dry, this "MycoComposite" can be used over and over. It can also decompose fully in just 30 days. Producing it uses only 12 percent of the energy required to make the same amount of plastic, and with 90 percent lower carbon emissions.

Another step in the right direction is Mattel's recent commitment to use 100 percent recycled, recyclable or bio-based plastics materials in both its products and packaging by 2030. Early in 2020 the company will debut its first product aligned with this new goal, the Fisher-Price Rock-a-Stack, made from sugarcane-based plastics and packaged in 100 percent recycled or sustainably sourced material.

Walmart announced in February that it seeks to achieve 100 percent recyclable, reusable or compostable packaging for its private brand packaging by 2025 and will encourage other brands it sells to set similar goals. The retailing behemoth is also working with suppliers to eliminate non-recyclable PVC plastic in general merchandise packaging altogether by 2020.

These efforts are laudable, but some worry that shifting to alternatives doesn't fully address the problem: Due to public concerns about plastic pollution, says Greenpeace's Graham Forbes, "we are witnessing a parade of corporations scrambling to look greener" by advancing false solutions that don't address our addiction to single-use packaging. Instead, Greenpeace argues, we need to get away from throwaways and refill our own containers. We'll only see real change, says Forbes, when we prioritize re-use.

CONTACTS: POI, plasticoceans.org; "Production, use, and fate of all plastics ever made," advances.sciencemag.org/content/3/7/e1700782; Ikea: A Sustainable Everyday, ikea.com/us/en/this-is-ikea/sustainable-everyday/; Mattel Citizenship, citizenship.mattel.com; Walmart Sustainability Index, corporate.walmart.com/global-responsibility/environment-sustainability/sustainability-index-leaders-shop; Greenpeace, greenpeace.org; #BreakFreeFromPlastic, breakfreefromplastic.org.

EarthTalk® is produced by Roddy Scheer & Doug Moss for the 501(c)3 nonprofit EarthTalk. See more at <https://emagazine.com>. To donate, visit <https://earthtalk.org>. Send questions to: question@earthtalk.org

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Weekly Vikings Roundup

By Jordan Wright

The Chicago Bears came to Minnesota for the final game of the 2019 regular season and left with a 21-19 victory. Chicago finished third in the NFC North with a record of 8-8, while the Vikings finished the season 10-6, good for 2nd in the division. Minnesota now turns their attention to the playoffs, while Chicago's offseason started as soon as the final whistle blew.

With the sixth seed already locked up, the Vikings opted to rest the starters for their week 17 tilt against the Bears. Even though the Vikings were playing backups against a full-strength Chicago team, the game ended up being close. The Vikings came from behind to take the lead in the fourth quarter, and the Bears needed a field goal with 10 seconds left in the game to secure the win.

While many fans wanted to see the first-team offense get some action, since the last time we saw them they were getting destroyed by Green Bay, it was the right decision by Mike Zimmer. Injuries happen all the time in the NFL, and allowing the starters a week of rest should give them an advantage in the first round of the playoffs. This also gave the front office one more chance to evaluate the bottom third of the roster in a game situation.

Quarterback Sean Mannion got the second start of his career, and it was a disappointing performance. He completed 12 of 21 passes (57%) for 126 yards, no touchdowns and two interceptions. Mannion's performance can't be blamed on the offensive line, because the second-team unit did a great job in this game. In pass protection, they didn't allow a sack and only gave up three QB hits. The line was also opening holes in the running game, which led to the team rushing 25 times for 174 yards (which is a staggering 6.9 yards per carry against a top-10 rush defense).

One thing that became apparent on Sunday was the Vikings have a ton of depth on the defensive line. Defensive ends Stephen Weatherly and Ifeadi Odenigbo were consistently wreaking havoc against the Bears' offensive line. Weatherly and Odenigbo combined for 13 tackles, 1.5 sacks, four QB hits. Odenigbo also had a strip sack of Trubisky in the fourth quarter and returned the fumble for a touchdown, but the score was overturned after replay showed his knee down as he was collecting the ball.

The player of the game on offense was Mike Boone. This might be a questionable call, because Boone was responsible for two turnovers, but nobody else on the offense did much against the Bears, so in this situation Boone's positives outweigh the negatives. Boone finished the game with 148 yards on 17 carries and a touchdown.

The player of the game on defense was Eric Wilson, who led or tied for the team lead in tackles (12), sacks (1), and tackles for a loss (2). The third-year player got his sixth start of the season and has proven to be a reliable linebacker when called upon.

Looking ahead, the Vikings will travel to New Orleans, who are the three seed in the NFC. FOX will air the game on Sunday, January 05 and kickoff will be at noon (CT). The Vikings have lost the last three games in New Orleans, including the infamous NFC Championship game (aka Bountygate) in the 2009 season. However, if the Vikings can shut down Michael Thomas (and that's a big if, considering Thomas just had one of the greatest seasons by a WR in NFL history), and "good Kirk" comes ready to play, there's a chance the Vikings could come away with a victory. Skoll!

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Late Openings

First State Bank of Claremont, Langford & Groton locations will open at 10am Monday.
The Brown County Courthouse and other Non-essential county offices will be closed Monday December 30, 2019.

The Jungle will be closed Mon. Dec 30th for lunch. They will open at 4pm.

City Hall will be closed

Groton Chiropractic will be closed until noon. We will re-evaluate the conditions at that time.

I-94 from Bismarck to Fargo closed; I-29 from Watertown to Canadian border closed

NVC/JVT offices will open at 10am on Monday, December 30th.

Lori's Pharmacy will open at noon on Monday, December 30.

Shed Those Fears of Cancer Treatment

Mrs. B came into the emergency room one night, years ago, with some stress related issue. After taking her history, I began to suspect there was something else bothering her. As I was beginning her physical exam she blurted out, "I know there is a breast mass but you're not going to send me to any breast cancer doctor!" She had already decided to avoid standard treatment and her next comment explained why, "My aunt suffered because of awful unnecessary surgery and chemotherapy," she said. I sensed there was no changing her mind and that meant trouble for my patient.



By Richard P. Holm, MD ~ Prairie Doc® Perspectives

The story evolved as my patient's breast cancer grew and eroded through her skin to become a weeping and tender sore. She soon sought out unconventional treatment by a non-physician from a neighboring town with an internet degree of some kind who promised to help her. The treatment involved a curious machine with flashing lights and an unusual noise which apparently indicated which group of herbal supplements the patient needed to buy in order to cure the cancer "naturally."

More women are diagnosed with breast cancer than any other malignancy, except for skin cancer. If the breast cancer hasn't spread outside of breast tissue, then, with treatment, the five-year survival is about 99 percent. If the cancer has spread to lymph nodes just outside the breast, then, with treatment, the five-year survival is about 90 percent. Even if the cancer has spread to distant parts of the body, which happens only in about six percent of the cases, then, with treatment, more than 25 percent are still alive after five years. Since 1989, the number of people who die from breast cancer has been steadily decreasing which is the direct result of improved methods for breast cancer screening, detection and treatment.

My patient died less than a year from our meeting in the emergency room. I still regret not convincing her to get help from a science-based breast cancer physician. She may have lived years longer and in more comfort. Many people are now being saved who were previously lost to all types of cancers. Even when lifesaving is not possible, current cancer treatment can at least improve the quality of the time that remains.

Bottom line: The fear of death and the fear of suffering keep some people from seeking medical help. Please shed those fears and seek science-based help.

Richard P. Holm, MD is founder of The Prairie Doc® and author of "Life's Final Season, A Guide for Aging and Dying with Grace" available on Amazon. For free and easy access to the entire Prairie Doc® library, visit www.prairiedoc.org and follow Prairie Doc® on Facebook featuring On Call with the Prairie Doc® a medical Q&A show streaming on Facebook and broadcast on SDPB most Thursdays at 7 p.m. central.

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Winter Weather Advisory

URGENT - WINTER WEATHER MESSAGE

National Weather Service Aberdeen SD

...WINTER WEATHER ADVISORY IN EFFECT UNTIL 9 PM CST THIS EVENING...

* **WHAT...**For the Winter Weather Advisory, snow expected. Total snow accumulations of up to one inch. Winds gusting as high as 40 mph.

* **WHERE...**Portions of northeast South Dakota and west central Minnesota.

* **WHEN...**For the Winter Weather Advisory, until 9 PM CST this evening.

* **IMPACTS...**Plan on slippery road conditions. Areas of blowing snow could significantly reduce visibility. The hazardous conditions could impact the morning or evening commute.

PRECAUTIONARY/PREPAREDNESS ACTIONS...

If you must travel, keep an extra flashlight, food, and water in your vehicle in case of an emergency.

Slow down and use caution while traveling.

In Minnesota, the latest road conditions can be obtained at 511mn.org, or by calling 5 1 1. In South Dakota, the latest road conditions can be obtained by calling 5 1 1.

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Winter Weather Advisory

Monday	Monday Night	Tuesday	Tuesday Night	New Year's Day
Chance Wintry Mix and Patchy Blowing Snow	Wintry Mix Likely and Areas Blowing Snow	Partly Sunny	Partly Cloudy	Partly Sunny
High: 22 °F	Low: 11 °F	High: 18 °F	Low: 10 °F	High: 29 °F

Winter Storm Wrapping Up

Monday Morning Update – Light snow continues over parts of central and northeast SD this morning and is expected to end as the day progresses. Winds continue to gust 40-50 mph but will also diminish throughout the day.

	6am Mon	Noon Mon	6pm Mon	Midnight Mon
Mobridge & surrounding area	Light Snow Blowing Snow			
Pierre & surrounding area	Light Snow Blowing Snow			
Miller & surrounding area	Light Snow Blowing Snow			
Aberdeen & surrounding area	Light Snow Blowing Snow			
Sisseton & surrounding area	Light Snow Blowing Snow			
Watertown & surrounding area	Light Snow Blowing Snow			

Visit www.weather.gov/abr for a detailed local forecast Updated: 12/30/2019 5:32 AM CT NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION

Light snow and gusty winds are still ongoing through the region, but the winter storm winds down the day progresses. Snow will diminish by late morning/early afternoon for most of the region. The coteau region may see light snow lingering into Monday evening. Additional snow accumulations today should be less than an inch.

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Today in Weather History

December 30, 1985: Winds gusted to 40 to 50 mph over northern South Dakota through the day and into the southern part of the state by late afternoon. The high winds lowered visibilities to near zero at times between Lemmon in Perkins County and Faith in Meade County. The strongest wind gusts were to 63 mph at Mitchell. At 9:33 pm CST, the strong winds blew a semi-tractor trailer off the highway one mile east of Aberdeen.

December 30, 2010: A strong upper-level low-pressure trough and associated surface low-pressure area moved across the region bringing the first of two consecutive blizzards to central and northeast South Dakota. Snowfall amounts of 3 to 6 inches combined with bitter cold north winds of 25 to 40 mph caused widespread blizzard conditions across central and northeast South Dakota from the late morning until the evening hours. Near zero visibilities caused dangerous travel conditions resulting in the closing of Interstates 29 and 90 along with several highways across the region. Several hundred people were stranded in the aftermath of the storm. A group of fishermen had to be rescued in Day County when they became stranded on the ice. The snowfall began across the area anywhere from 7 to 11 am CST and ended between 10 pm and 1 am CST.

1960: A massive accumulation of snow, 68.2 inches to be exact, buries the Japanese city of Tsukayama in 24 hours. Tsukayama is located in the coastal mountains inland from the Sea of Japan along Honshu's west coast and subject to significant sea-effect snowfalls

2003: The first time in five years, sections of Las Vegas receive an inch or two of snow on cars, roads, sidewalks, and trees, while snow flurries fell on downtown and the Strip.

2014: Steam Devils were seen over Lake Superior near Saginaw, Minnesota.

2017: Funnels/steam devils were observed on Lake McConaughy, Nebraska in the morning. A boundary moved over the lake's 'warmer' water (compared to the surrounding air). The combination of converging winds and energy added by the lake helped spin these up.

1880 - The temperature at Charlotte, NC, plunged to an all-time record cold reading of 5 degrees below zero, a record which was equalled on the 21st of January in 1985. (The Weather Channel)

1917 - A great cold wave set many records in the northeastern U.S. The mercury plunged to 13 degrees below zero at New York City, and to 15 degrees below zero at Boston. Temperature readings dipped below zero at Boston five nights in a row. Berlin NH hit 44 degrees below zero in the "Great World War I Cold Wave," and Saint Johnsbury VT reached 43 degrees below zero. (David Ludlum)

1933 - The temperature reached 50 degrees below zero at Bloomfield, VT. It was the coldest reading in modern records for New England. The temperature at Pittsburgh NH reached 44 degrees below zero. (David Ludlum)

1955 - Anchorage, AK, reported an all-time record snow depth of 47 inches. (30th-1st) (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A storm in the western U.S. produced heavy snow in Utah, with 28 inches reported in the Mount Holly and Elk Meadows area. Strong winds prevailed ahead of a cold front in the central U.S. Winds gusted to 46 mph at Dodge City KS, and reached 80 mph at Ruidoso NM. Strong northerly winds, ushering arctic cold into the north central U.S., created blizzard conditions in western Minnesota and central and eastern South Dakota. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Unseasonably cold weather prevailed in the southwestern U.S. A week of subfreezing temperatures in southern California claimed the lives of five people. Redding CA was blanketed with four inches of snow. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Extreme cold continued across northern Maine. Milo ME was the cold spot in the nation with a morning low of 38 degrees below zero, and the low of 31 degrees below zero at Caribou ME was a December record for that location. Freezing rain spread across much of Lower Michigan, knocking out electrical power to 1.9 million customers in southeastern Lower Michigan. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 29 °F at 1:16 AM

Low Temp: 19 °F at 10:22 PM

Wind: 34 mph at 10:31 AM

Day Precip:

Saturday: 2.5" snow. .23 of moisture content

Sunday: 4" Snow 0.31 moisture content

Monday: 4" Snow 0.41 moisture content

TOTAL STORM SO FAR: 10.5" Snow .95 moisture

Record High: 52° in 1980

Record Low: -34° in 1917

Average High: 23°F

Average Low: 2°F

Average Precip in Dec.: 0.48

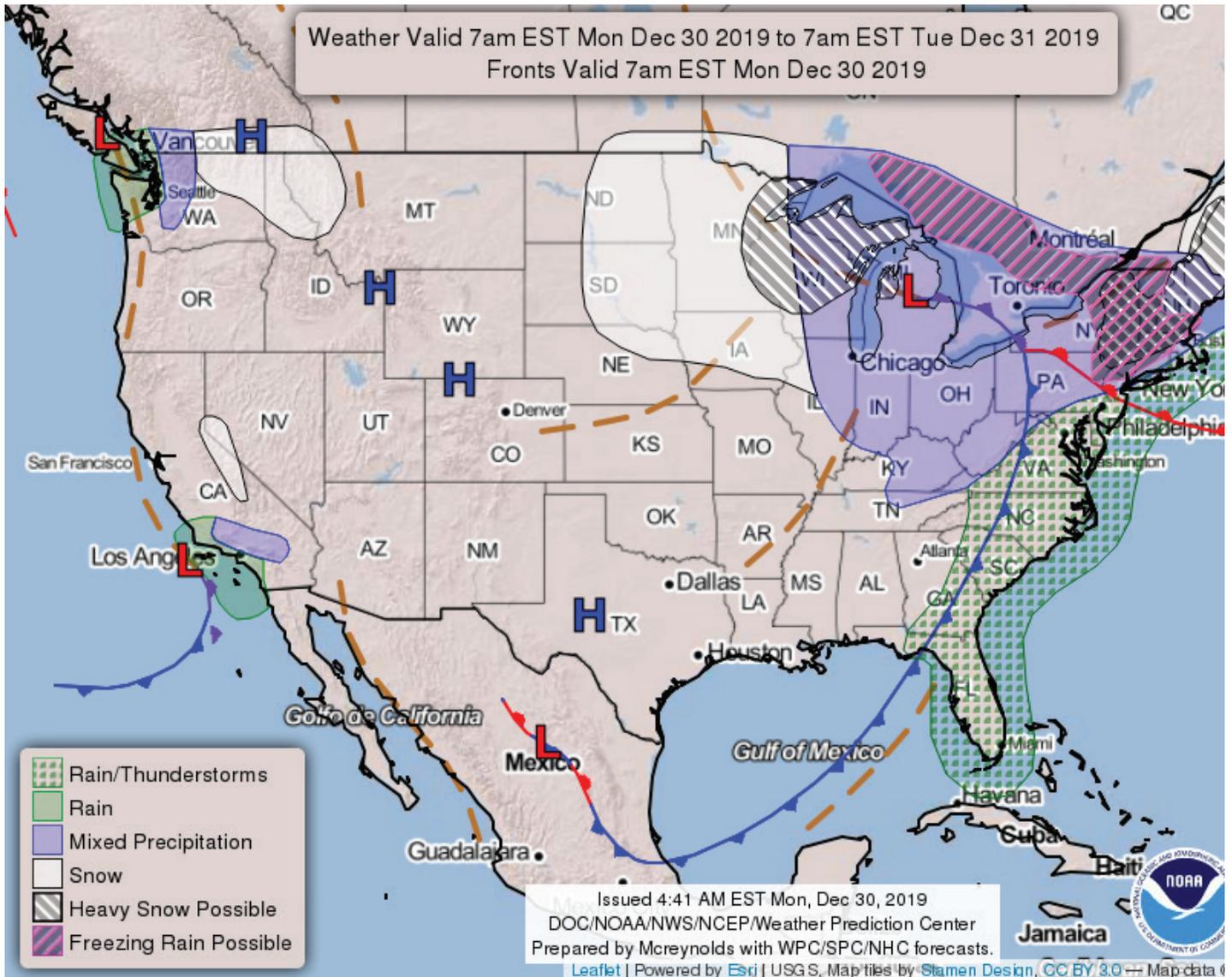
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.65

Average Precip to date: 21.68

Precip Year to Date: 28.60

Sunset Tonight: 4:59 p.m.

Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:14 a.m.



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STRENGTH FOR THE JOURNEY

"Why are you sitting there just staring off into space?" one friend asked another.

"Well, this year has been awful. It's the worst year that I can ever remember. Nothing's gone right, so that means everything has gone wrong. So, right now I'm trying to figure out what was the worst thing that happened. But there's too much competition for first place."

Call them what you will: Misfortunes or mishaps, troubles or trials, adversities or afflictions. They are part of all of our lives and no one is immune to them.

But some seem to get through them, over them or around them better than others. Does their strength come from a superior source? Do they have a resource to call upon that is unavailable to the rest of us?

There is a story of the men of Judah standing before the Lord with their little ones. Suddenly, the spirit of the Lord came on one of the men. The message that came to him to give to the others was simple: "Do not be afraid. Do not be discouraged. Go out there tomorrow, for the Lord is with you!"

All Christians have God's Spirit in them, Who goes before them and can – if allowed – work through them. If we stand firm in our faith and ask for God's help, He will fight our battles for us and give us victory.

Prayer: Lord, when adversity tries to stare us down, may we look up to you to save and sustain us. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture: 2 Chronicles 20:13-17 ...Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Go out to face them tomorrow, and the LORD will be with you.

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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)

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News from the Associated Press

Pile helps Omaha rally past South Dakota State 81-78

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — Matt Pile totaled 18 points and nine rebounds and Marlon Ruffin hit two free throws with 6 seconds left in the game as Omaha held off South Dakota State 81-78 on Sunday.

Noah Freidel sank two free throws with 2:11 remaining to give South Dakota State a 76-75 lead, but Pile and KJ Robinson answered with back-to-back layups to put the Mavericks up 79-76 with 26 seconds left. Alex Arians' layup pulled the Jackrabbits within a point. Robinson missed a free throw, but Pile blocked Douglas Wilson's layup attempt and Ruffin grabbed the rebound and was fouled by Matt Dentlinger.

JT Gibson topped Omaha (8-8) with 21 points, while Robinson scored 16. Ayo Akinwale added 10 points on 4-of-4 shooting.

Freidel, a freshman, paced South Dakota State with a career-high 28 points. He hit 6 of 13 from 3-point range. Arians added 16 points and seven rebounds, while Douglas Wilson pitched in with 13 points, five rebounds and four assists.

For more AP college basketball coverage: <https://apnews.com/Collegebasketball> and http://twitter.com/AP_Top25

W. Illinois takes Summit opener beating South Dakota 82-75

MACOMB, Ill. (AP) — Zion Young scored 21 points and Kobe Webster scored 18 and Western Illinois beat South Dakota 82-75 in a Summit League opener on Sunday.

The duo combined to make 16 of the Leathernecks' (4-7) 31 field goals.

Western Illinois led 39-38 at halftime. A 13-4 run after intermission extended the lead to 52-42 before South Dakota (9-6) began climbing back. Stanley Umude made 1 of 2 foul shots with 8:58 left to tie it at 66-all. The Leathernecks responded with an 8-0 run and the Coyotes never got within four points down the stretch.

C.J. Duff scored 12, Ben Pyle 11 and James Claar 10 for Western Illinois.

Umude led the Coyotes with 27 points and Tyler Hagedorn scored 17.

For more AP college basketball coverage: <https://apnews.com/Collegebasketball> and http://twitter.com/AP_Top25

Winter storm closes much of Interstate 90 in South Dakota

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota officials closed much of Interstate 90 as a winter storm pushes across the state

Eastbound I-90 was closed from Rapid City to Mitchell while westbound I-90 from Mitchell to Wall was closed Saturday night. Transportation and public safety officials say I-90 will remain closed into Monday.

Officials also closed both north and southbound lanes of I-29 from Watertown to the North Dakota border on Sunday afternoon.

The National Weather Service said 8 to 11 inches (20 to 28 centimeters) of snow already has fallen in south central South Dakota as of Sunday morning. Another 6 to 10 inches (15 to 25 centimeters) of snow could fall in the James River Valley before the storm moves on Monday.

Officials say many roads in South Dakota are ice covered. Travel is discouraged unless absolutely necessary.

Visitation was canceled at Mike Durfee State Prison in Springfield on Sunday due to the weather.

China convicts 3 researchers involved in gene-edited babies

By KEN MORITSUGU Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — A Chinese scientist who set off an ethical debate with claims that he had made the world's first genetically edited babies was sentenced Monday to three years in prison because of his research, state media said.

He Jiankui, who was convicted of practicing medicine without a license, was also fined 3 million yuan (\$430,000) by a court in the southern city of Shenzhen, China's official Xinhua News Agency reported. Two other researchers involved in the project received lesser sentences and fines.

The verdict said the three defendants had not obtained qualification as doctors, pursued fame and profits, deliberately violated Chinese regulations on scientific research and crossed an ethical line in both scientific research and medicine, according to Xinhua. It also said they had fabricated ethical review documents.

The court said the researchers were involved in the births of three gene-edited babies to two women, confirming reports of a third baby. It said all three pleaded guilty during the trial, which Xinhua reported was closed to the public because of privacy concerns.

He, the lead researcher, shocked the scientific world when he announced in November 2018 that he had altered the embryos of twin girls who had been born the same month. He described his work in exclusive interviews with The Associated Press.

The announcement sparked a global debate over the ethics of gene editing. He said he had used a tool called CRISPR to try to disable a gene that allows the AIDS virus to enter a cell, in a bid to give the girls the ability to resist the infection. The identity of the girls has not been released, and it isn't clear if the experiment succeeded.

The CRISPR tool has been tested elsewhere in adults to treat diseases, but many in the scientific community denounced He's work as medically unnecessary and unethical, because any genetic changes could be passed down to future generations. The U.S. forbids editing embryos except for lab research.

He, who is known as "JK," told the AP in 2018 that he felt a strong responsibility to make an example, and that society would decide whether to allow the practice to go forward. He disappeared from public view shortly after he announced his research at a conference in Hong Kong 13 months ago, apparently detained by authorities, initially in an apartment in Shenzhen, a city in Guangdong province that borders Hong Kong.

It wasn't clear if the three-year prison term includes any of the time he has already spent in Chinese custody.

A Chinese scientist said the sentence should have been harsher to deter others. Kehkooi Kee, a Tsinghua University researcher who conducts gene-editing research on stem cells, also said that He should be held responsible for any fallout from the experiment on the lives of the babies and their families.

Dr. William Hurlbut, a Stanford University bioethicist whose advice He sought for more than a year before his experiment, said he felt sorry for the scientist, his wife and two young daughters.

"I warned him things could end this way, but it was just too late," Hurlbut wrote in an email to the AP and to the director of the U.S. National Institutes of Health, Dr. Francis Collins, and gene-editing pioneer Jennifer Doudna at the University of California, Berkeley.

"Sad story — everyone lost in this (JK, his family, his colleagues, and his country), but the one gain is that the world is awakened to the seriousness of our advancing genetic technologies," Hurlbut wrote.

He studied in the U.S. before setting up a lab at the Southern University of Science and Technology of China in Shenzhen. The verdict accused him of colluding with Zhang Renli and Qin Jinzhou, who worked at medical institutes in the same province.

Zhang was sentenced to two years in prison and fined 1 million yuan, Xinhua said. Qin received an 18-month prison sentence, but with a two-year reprieve, and a 500,000 yuan fine.

Associated Press Chief Medical Writer Marilyn Marchione in Baltimore and researchers Shanshan Wang and Yu Bing in Beijing and Fu Ting in Bangkok contributed to this report.

Police, victims warn against firing guns on New Year's Eve

By MARK GILLISPIE Associated Press

Kaitlyn Kong thought she had been punched hard in the abdomen as she stood among thousands of people in downtown Raleigh, North Carolina, as the new year arrived a year ago. Her best friend, standing next to her, thought Kong had been stabbed as blood poured from a wound.

It wasn't until Kong underwent an X-ray that she and hospital medical staff realized she had been shot after someone fired a gun into the air to celebrate the new year.

Although rare, people being shot by celebratory gunfire on New Year's Eve and other holidays like the Fourth of July does happen, prompting law enforcement authorities to caution people that bullets fired into the air can endanger people's lives.

Raleigh police Lt. Mario Campos said the city receives a small number of calls about gunfire during New Year's Eve celebrations in the city but would not discuss what happened to Kong, saying it remains under investigation. Raleigh police said at the time that the shot could have been fired from several blocks away.

"Our message has always been not to do it because it's dangerous and illegal in our city," Campos said. "Bullets can travel a long distance. Any gunfire discharged into the air has to come down and land on something."

A 9-year-old boy in Cleveland was wounded by a stray bullet last New Year's Eve as he watched television inside his family's home. The boy's mother declined to be interviewed. Another 9-year-old boy in Atlanta was shot in the abdomen by celebratory gunfire early Jan. 1 while he and his family set off fireworks.

A 4-year-old boy was killed in 2010 in Decatur, Georgia, when an AK-47 round penetrated a church roof and struck him in the head as he sat next to his parents during a New Year's Eve service.

Kong, then a senior at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, headed to downtown Raleigh with her friend for the city's family-friendly First Night celebration. Kong, 23, said she was pointing her phone upward to capture video of fireworks as confetti floated down on the crowd when it suddenly felt as if she had been punched "super hard," prompting her to clutch her friend's shoulder, not able to speak.

Bystanders helped move her out of the crowd, and a police officer called for an ambulance while pressure was applied to the wound.

"I didn't think it was that serious, but I was hurting a lot," Kong said.

It turned out to be quite serious. The bullet entered her chest and penetrated a lung, her diaphragm and stomach before lodging near her hip. Kong underwent a four-hour surgery. She recovered enough to return to classes days later with some assistance. She graduated in May with a degree in environmental studies.

"If it had been any higher, it could have done some permanent damage, to say the least," Kong said.

A 2004 study from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said people struck by gunfire shot into the air are most likely to be hit in the head.

That's what happened to Texas state Rep. Armando Martinez as he celebrated the new year at a friend's home in Weslaco, Texas, on Jan. 1, 2017. He and his family had waited in the friend's garage until gunfire had subsided to let off fireworks, he said.

Martinez told NBC News that his wife had just wished him a happy new year with a kiss when a .223-caliber round fell from the sky and penetrated his skull. It felt, he said, as if he had been "hit by a sledgehammer."

"I was extremely lucky," Martinez said. "My surgeons said if it went a couple more millimeters deeper, I may not have been able to have this conversation right now."

Carl Leisinger III, a retired New Jersey State Police major and supervisor of the agency's forensics laboratory, said a 9 mm round like the one that wounded Kong would typically leave the barrel at around 1,100 feet per second and then fall down at 200 to 300 feet per second. How far a bullet fired into the air travels sideways will depend on wind and other factors, he said.

"She's very fortunate she didn't die," Leisinger said.

Kong said she plans to celebrate somewhere this New Year's Eve, but not in downtown Raleigh.

"You can't let it stop you from living your life," she said. "Maybe I'm that kind of person."

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2020 Watch: Messy primary finally meets election year

By BILL BARROW Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — The presidential politics calendar turned to 2020 nearly a year ago. This week, the actual date catches up. What we're watching as the preseason closes and election year opens:

Days to Iowa caucuses: 35

Days to general election: 309

THE NARRATIVE

The ups, downs and swerves of 2019 yielded a stable top slate. Former Vice President Joe Biden leads most national polls of Democratic primary voters, with Sens. Bernie Sanders of Vermont and Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts within striking distance. Yet in the first caucus state of Iowa and the first primary state of New Hampshire, there's a jumble of Biden, Sanders, Warren and Mayor Pete Buttigieg of South Bend, Indiana. At first glance, it's a clean choice: Biden and Buttigieg hail from the center-left; Warren and Sanders come from the progressive left. Reality is more layered. All four have weaknesses within Democrats' diverse electorate; each makes a different case for carrying the banner against President Donald Trump, who is now impeached but a near certainty to survive a Senate trial. If that's not enough indecision, several wildcards — including two billionaires — still hope to scramble the contest.

THE BIG QUESTIONS

Money: Who can (sort of) compete with Michael Bloomberg's wallet?

The fourth-quarter fundraising period ends Tuesday. Warren and Sanders set the early curve for grassroots donations, outpacing Buttigieg and Biden, who tap traditional deep-pocketed contributors in addition to online donors. Now those small-donor juggernauts must compete with former New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who's used a share of his estimated \$50 billion personal fortune to blanket television and digital advertising and build an expansive staff in Super Tuesday states. For his rivals, it's not so much about keeping up; Bloomberg can easily outspend every other campaign, including that of fellow billionaire Tom Steyer. But there's only so much television time for sale, and if Warren and Sanders want to plow big money into Super Tuesday, especially the expensive television markets of California, they'll need as much cash as possible ahead of time. Biden, meanwhile, has already secured his best fundraising quarter (a relative comparison for a candidate who's lagged other top-tier contenders). The question is whether Biden's "best" mollifies establishment Democrats who waved red flags when he reported having less than \$9 million on hand at September's end.

Money, Part II: How long can Cory Booker keep going?

The year-end deadline is critical for New Jersey Sen. Cory Booker as he reaches for relevance. The last of two African American candidates (along with former Massachusetts Gov. Deval Patrick), Booker made a do-or-die money appeal in September, and it worked. But it'll take more than scraping by to fund the turnaround he envisions: a surprise finish in overwhelmingly white Iowa to kick-start a dramatic rise in more diverse primary states that follow (Barack Obama's 2008 path). Campaigns that hit big fundraising numbers tend to leak that news before Federal Election Commission filings are due. Candidates with bad news tend to wait. So, it bears watching how Booker's team plays it to start January.

Is Amy Klobuchar being overlooked in Iowa?

Those previously mentioned Iowa and New Hampshire jumbles omit Amy Klobuchar. But the Minnesota senator is plugging away in both states. She just hit her 99th Iowa county (that's all of them), demonstrating her effort to use complex caucus rules that can reward candidates with a wide geographic footprint. Notably, Klobuchar's strategy tracks Biden. Both aim for a more consistent appeal across 1,679 precincts than Warren, Sanders and Buttigieg muster on Feb. 3. The question becomes how many precincts give both Biden and Klobuchar the minimum 15% support required to count toward delegates. Anyone who doesn't hit that viability mark drops from subsequent ballots, their backers going up for grabs. Biden's

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Iowa hopes depend in part on picking up moderates on realignment votes (read: Klobuchar and Buttigieg supporters). If Klobuchar is as strong as she hopes to be, she could turn that strategy around on Biden, driving him below viability and attracting his supporters on later ballots. Biden returns to Iowa this week for another bus tour, though not as lengthy as his eight-day jaunt after Thanksgiving.

Is Sanders a true contender this time?

Sanders lost the 2016 nomination because of Hillary Clinton's advantage among non-white Democrats. Since then, Sanders has deepened his ties among Latinos, African Americans and other non-whites. Warren and Buttigieg are still chasing that success. Sanders' advisers believe the senator is well-positioned to challenge Biden among non-whites if he's able to build early momentum in New Hampshire and Iowa, where Sanders will spend New Year's Eve. If they're right, that would open avenues to delegates Sanders didn't get in 2016.

Is Trump's position improving?

The president has never been popular judged in a vacuum. In 2016, he won GOP primaries with pluralities and lost the general election popular vote. As president, he's never reached majority job approval in Gallup's polling. But he's still hovering in the 40s, not far from where his immediate predecessors were 11 months before winning second terms. Impeachment proceedings haven't affected Trump's standing. Meanwhile, the same Democratic-run House that impeached him approved his new North America trade pact. Top-line economic numbers shine, even if the on-ground reality is uneven. And Trump could be on the cusp of a peace deal in Afghanistan after the Taliban ruling council on Sunday agreed to a temporary cease-fire. As frenetic as Trump's messaging is, he proved in 2016 that he relishes framing binary choices for voters, and he's more than convinced he has a case in 2020.

THE FINAL THOUGHT

Most voters are just tuning into a presidential race that's raged for a year. They'll find a Democratic contest featuring stark options on policy and personality, but lacking an undisputed favorite. Candidates are navigating primary politics: dancing along the progressive-liberal-moderate spectrum and carefully choosing when to go after each other. At the same time, Trump dominates the 2020 narrative, a fact demonstrated most recently as Biden spent two days talking about whether he'd testify in a Senate trial on Trump's removal from office. It's untidy enough for Trump's reelection campaign to boast confidence and some Democrats to fret openly. History suggests, however, that all observers should respect the volatility. Indeed, incumbent presidents are difficult to beat. (Eight out of the last 11 who sought reelection won). But when they do lose, it's nearly always to a challenger who emerged from the opposition party's messy, even chaotic primary. Democrats' chaos is just getting warmed up.

2020 Watch runs every Monday and provides a look at the week ahead in the 2020 election.

Follow Barrow at <https://twitter.com/BillBarrowAP>

Catch up on the 2020 election campaign with AP experts on our weekly politics podcast, "Ground Game."

Putin weighs future options as he marks 20 years in power

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — As Russian President Vladimir Putin marks two decades in power, he boasts about his achievements but remains coy about his political future — a reticence that fuels wild speculation about his intentions.

Putin points to the revival of Russia's global clout, industrial modernization, booming agricultural exports and a resurgent military as key results of his tenure that began on Dec. 31, 1999. On that day, Russia's first President Boris Yeltsin abruptly stepped down and named the former KGB officer his successor, paving the way for his election three months later.

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Critics accuse Putin of rolling back post-Soviet freedoms to establish tight control over the political scene, marginalize the opposition and stifle critical media. They hold him responsible for tensions with the West after Russia's 2014 annexation of Ukraine's Crimea, which bolstered his approval ratings but triggered U.S. and European sanctions.

"Putin stopped the normal development of Russia as a normal market economy and a normal political democracy" and turned the country into a "global spoiler," said Andrei Kolesnikov, a researcher with the Carnegie Moscow Center.

Kremlin watchers are trying to predict what will happen after Putin's current six-year term ends in 2024. They agree on one thing: Putin, Russia's longest-serving leader since Soviet dictator Josef Stalin, will likely stay at the helm.

A fitness fan, the 67-year old Putin appears in good shape to stay on. He regularly practices judo, skis and plays ice hockey in a demonstration of his vigor.

He remains widely popular, although the propaganda effect of Crimea's annexation has worn off amid stagnant living standards, a rise in the retirement age and other domestic challenges.

Putin can easily use the rubber-stamp parliament to scrap term limits, but most observers expect him to take a less straightforward approach. A law faculty graduate, the Russian leader prefers more delicate methods that have a democratic veneer.

Earlier this month, Putin hinted at possible constitutional amendments to re-distribute powers among the president, the Cabinet and parliament.

He didn't specify what changes could be made, but the announcement may signal his intention to trim presidential powers and continue ruling the country as prime minister.

There are other opportunities. Kazakhstan's longtime leader Nursultan Nazarbayev offered an example this year when he abruptly resigned and had his protege elected president in a snap vote. The 79-year-old Nazarbayev retained his grip on power by securing a prominent position as head of the nation's security council.

There is another, more dramatic option. Many in neighboring Belarus fear that the Kremlin could push for a full merger of the two ex-Soviet allies to allow Putin to become the head of a new unified state.

When asked recently if he was considering it, Putin dodged the question.

Each of those potential options carries major risks.

Putin moved into the prime minister's seat from 2008-2012 after eight years as president to observe a constitutional limit of two consecutive terms, allowing Dmitry Medvedev to take the top seat.

Putin continued calling the shots under Medvedev, who obediently stepped down after one term. Putin benefited from his placeholder's move to extend the presidential term to six years, but still wasn't quite happy with the "tandem rule."

Putin was particularly critical of Medvedev's decision to let the United Nations give the go-ahead to a 2011 Western air campaign in Libya that helped oust longtime dictator Moammar Gadhafi and plunged the country into chaos.

And at home, the announcement of Putin's return to the presidency sparked massive protests in Moscow in 2011-2012 and caused a rift among elites. Putin's aides suspected some of Medvedev's lieutenants of prodding their boss to stay for a second term and encouraging the protests.

Putin's statement this month about a possible change to the constitution to limit the president to just two terms altogether was widely interpreted as a signal that he was contemplating creating a new governing position for himself while trimming the authority of his successor.

If Putin chooses to become prime minister with new broad powers, it may raise other threats.

By empowering a parliamentary majority to name the prime minister, Putin would become more vulnerable because he will depend on the ruling party's performance. While Putin's approval ratings have remained high, the popularity of the main Kremlin-directed party, the United Russia, has plummeted and the president has kept it at a distance.

A merger with Belarus to create a new leadership position has even greater risks. The prospect may excite some Russians who dream about revival of imperial glory, but it is certain to trigger strong resistance

in Belarus and further antagonize the West.

Belarus' authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko, who has been in office for more than a quarter-century, has vowed to uphold Belarus' post-Soviet independence. While the Kremlin has pressured him by raising energy prices and cutting subsidies, Lukashenko has remained adamant and even warned recently that Russia's attempt to take over his country could trigger a war with NATO.

"The interest of Lukashenko is to be the dictator of his own nation state, not the person who will be dependent on the will of Putin," Kolesnikov said.

Whatever path Putin chooses, he's widely expected to keep his intentions secret until the last moment.

"This uncertainty has its advantages — you can play groups of interests against each other, you can hold them in this situation of uncertainty," said Moscow-based political analyst Yekaterina Shulman. "But it can't go on for too long because it provokes infighting within the elites."

She noted that the Kremlin may call the parliamentary elections that are currently set for 2021 at an earlier date before approval ratings plummet.

"It's important to have a loyal majority in the parliament," Shulman said. "How to achieve this is a tricky question."

Shulman argued that the Kazakhstan-style scenario appears the most likely. She said staying at the helm but sharing authority with his successor would allow Putin to temper an inevitable succession battle among his lieutenants.

"The difficulty in the successor model is that the whole amount of power vested in the current president is untransferable indeed to any other person," Shulman said. "But if this power is redistributed, at least part of it, then it's easier for the decision-makers to agree on the figure of the potential successor."

Konstantin Manenkov in Moscow contributed to this report.

Police: Parishioners kill man who fatally shoots 2 at church

WHITE SETTLEMENT, Texas (AP) — A man pulled out a shotgun at a Texas church service and fired on worshippers Sunday, killing two people before he was shot to death by congregants who fired back, police said.

Authorities at a Sunday evening news conference praised the two congregants who opened fire as part of a volunteer security team at West Freeway Church of Christ in White Settlement. It was unclear if the two people who were killed were the two who shot at the gunman.

"This team responded quickly and within six seconds, the shooting was over. Two of the parishioners who were volunteers of the security force drew their weapons and took out the killer immediately, saving untold number of lives," said Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, who also hailed the state's gun laws.

Britt Farmer, senior minister of the church, said, "We lost two great men today, but it could have been a lot worse."

Authorities said there were more than 240 parishioners in the West Freeway Church at the time of the shooting.

White Settlement Police Department Chief J.P. Bevering said the gunman had sat down in a pew before getting up, taking out a shotgun and firing at a parishioner, who was killed. He said the church's security team then "eliminated the threat."

Officials have not released the names of the victims or the gunman. FBI Special Agent in Charge Matthew DeSarno said they're working to identify the gunman's motive, adding that he is "relatively transient" but had roots in the area.

DeSarno also said the gunman had been arrested multiple times in the past but declined to give details.

An elder at the church told the New York Times that one of those killed was a security guard who responded to the shooter, calling him a dear friend.

"He was trying to do what he needed to do to protect the rest of us," said the elder, Mike Tinius.

"It's extremely upsetting to see anyone committing violence," he said.

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Tinius said he didn't know the gunman and that the shooting appeared to be random.

A woman who answered the phone at the West Freeway Church of Christ told the AP she could not answer any questions and that she was told to direct inquiries to authorities.

In a livestream of the church service, the gunman can be seen getting up from a pew and talking to someone at the back of the church before pulling out a gun and opening fire. Parishioners can then be heard screaming and seen ducking under pews or running as papers fly to the floor.

Two people with minor injuries that were sustained while ducking for cover were treated at the scene, MedStar Mobile Healthcare spokeswoman Macara Trusty said.

Gov. Greg Abbott asked the state to pray for the victims, their loved ones and the community of White Settlement, about 8 miles (12 kilometers) west of Fort Worth.

"Places of worship are meant to be sacred, and I am grateful for the church members who acted quickly to take down the shooter and help prevent further loss of life," Abbott said in a tweeted statement.

It is not the first deadly shooting to take place at a church in Texas. In November 2017, Devin Patrick Kelley opened fire on the congregation at a church in Sutherland Springs, killing more than two dozen worshippers, before taking his own life. And in 1999, a gunman killed seven people in Wedgwood Baptist Church in Fort Worth before detonating an explosive device and killing himself.

Sunday's shooting in Texas was also the second attack on a religious gathering in the U.S. in less than 24 hours. On Saturday night, a man stabbed five people as they celebrated Hanukkah in an Orthodox Jewish community north of New York City.

5 stabbed at Hanukkah celebration in latest attack on Jews

By RYAN TARINELLI, MICHAEL R. SISAK and MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

MONSEY, N.Y. (AP) — A knife-wielding man stormed into a rabbi's home and stabbed five people as they celebrated Hanukkah in an Orthodox Jewish community north of New York City, an ambush the governor said Sunday was an act of domestic terrorism fueled by intolerance and a "cancer" of growing hatred in America.

Police tracked a fleeing suspect to Manhattan and made an arrest within two hours of the attack Saturday night in Monsey. Grafton E. Thomas had blood all over his clothing, smelled of bleach but said "almost nothing" when officers stopped him, officials said.

An automated license plate reader alerted officers that the suspect's car had crossed over the George Washington Bridge into New York City about an hour after the attack. Thomas was stopped and taken into custody about 20-30 minutes later, NYPD Commissioner Dermot Shea said.

Security camera footage the NYPD made public Sunday night showed two officers approaching Thomas' sedan with guns drawn before the suspect placed his hands on the roof of the car and he was put in handcuffs.

President Donald Trump condemned the "horrific" attack, saying in a tweet Sunday that "We must all come together to fight, confront, and eradicate the evil scourge of anti-Semitism."

One witness described the attack as a chaotic scene punctuated with panic and screams.

Thomas, 37, was arraigned Sunday and pleaded not guilty to five counts of attempted murder and one count of burglary. Bail was set at \$5 million and he remains jailed. He didn't answer questions as authorities escorted him to a waiting vehicle.

Thomas' criminal history includes an arrest for assaulting a police horse, according to an official briefed on the investigation who was not authorized to discuss the matter publicly and spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity. A lawyer representing Thomas at the arraignment said he had no convictions.

The Greenwood Lake street where Thomas lived with his mother, about 20 miles (32 kilometers) from Monsey, was blocked with police tape Sunday as FBI agents and police officers carried items from their home.

The FBI is seeking a warrant to obtain his online accounts and were scouring digital evidence, the official said. They are also looking into his mental health history.

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The family's pastor, the Rev. Wendy Paige, said Thomas has been suffering from mental illness and that his family believes that condition was the cause of the alleged stabbings — not hatred toward Jewish people. She said his family is sorry for the pain he has caused.

The stabbings on the seventh night of Hanukkah left one person critically wounded, Gov. Andrew Cuomo said. The rabbi's son was also injured, he said. Authorities have not provided a motive and Shea said investigators do not believe, at this point, that any other people were involved.

The attack was the latest in a string of violence targeting Jews in the region, including a Dec. 10 massacre at a kosher grocery store in New Jersey. Last month in Monsey, a man was stabbed while walking to a synagogue.

Cuomo said Saturday's savagery was the 13th anti-Semitic attack in New York since Dec. 8 and endemic of "an American cancer on the body politic."

"This is violence spurred by hate, it is mass violence and I consider this an act of domestic terrorism," Cuomo said. "Let's call it what it is."

Ramapo Police Chief Brad Weidel said it was unclear why the rabbi's house was targeted or if a specific ideology motivated the suspect. According to the official briefed on the investigation, authorities do not believe Thomas is connected to recent anti-Semitic incidents in New York City.

Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., called on the FBI to investigate possible links between the Monsey stabbing spree and other recent attacks. The Simon Wiesenthal Center said it wants the FBI to create a special task force.

"Enough talk, it is time for action to deter those who propagate this hatred," Israeli U.N. Ambassador Danny Danon said.

The stabbings happened around 10 p.m. Saturday at the home of Rabbi Chaim Rottenberg, located next door to his Congregation Netzach Yisroel synagogue. The large house on Forshay Road remained cordoned off with yellow crime-scene tape early Sunday. By evening, the tape was gone and a fully lit menorah shone from a window.

"The guy came in wielding a big knife, sword, machete — I don't know what it was," said Josef Gluck, who hit the assailant with a coffee table during the attack.

"He took it out of his holder, started swinging," Gluck said.

The dining room, he said, emptied in split seconds. While inside the home, the assailant didn't say a word as he carried out the attack, he said.

Levy Kraus, 15, said he was near the rabbi's home when he saw a tall man enter with an object.

"He had something in his hand. It looked like an umbrella. It was covered," Kraus said.

Later, he said he saw the man rushing out of the house and scream at someone, "I'll get you."

Rabbi Motti Seligson, the media director of the Chabad Lubavitch movement, said witnesses told him that people fled the house and went to the synagogue where they locked themselves in. Rabbi Rottenberg led the service at the synagogue later, he said.

Weidel said a witness saw the suspect fleeing in a car and alerted police to the license plate number. Police entered that information into a database and used plate reader technology to track the vehicle to Manhattan, where Thomas was arrested.

"It was critical to the case," Weidel said.

Thomas played football for two seasons at William Paterson University in New Jersey. No one answered a telephone number listed for his address and the voicemail box was full.

Monsey, near the New Jersey state line about 35 miles (56 kilometers) north of New York City, is one of several Hudson Valley communities that has seen a rising population of Hasidic Jews in recent years.

At a celebration in Monsey on Sunday that was planned before the shooting, several members of the community stood guard armed with assault-style rifles. They refused to give their names when approached by an AP journalist, but they said they were there to defend their community.

Jewish communities in the New York City metropolitan area have been left shaken following the deadly Dec. 10 shooting rampage at a Jersey City kosher market.

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Six people — three people who had been inside the store, a police officer and the two killers — died in the gunbattle and standoff that New Jersey Attorney General Gurbir Grewal has said was “fueled” by hatred of Jews and law enforcement.

Last month, a man was stabbed while walking to a synagogue in the same town that was the site of Saturday night’s attack; he required surgery. It’s unclear whether the assailant has been arrested.

And this past week in New York City itself, police have received at least six reports — eight since Dec. 13 — of attacks possibly motivated by anti-Jewish bias. Mayor Bill de Blasio said Friday that police presence would increase in Brooklyn neighborhoods home to large Jewish populations.

Additional New York City police officers were being sent to areas of Brooklyn with high Jewish populations, along with lighting towers and additional security cameras, de Blasio said.

The mayor also announced the formation of multi-ethnic, interfaith safety coalitions that would meet to strategize about disrupting potential hate crimes before they happen. He said some city schools in Brooklyn will also incorporate hate-crimes awareness into their curriculum.

“The Jewish community is utterly terrified,” Evan Bernstein, the regional director of the Anti-Defamation League of New York and New Jersey, said in a statement. “No one should have to live like this. How many more times will it take for people in the Orthodox Jewish community to be terrorized with violence before something changes?”

Sisak and Balsamo reported from New York. Ted Shaffrey in Monsey, Jessie Wardarski in Greenwood Lake, and Gary Fields and Ryan Kryska in New York contributed to this report.

On Twitter, follow and send tips to Ryan Tarinelli at twitter.com/ryantarinelli, Michael Sisak at <https://twitter.com/mikesisak> and Michael Balsamo at twitter.com/MikeBalsamo1

Pats to play in wild-card game, 49ers get NFC’s No. 1 seed

By DENNIS WASZAK Jr. AP Pro Football Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Tom Brady and the New England Patriots will be playing in the postseason a week earlier than usual this year.

The defending Super Bowl champs open the playoffs during wild-card weekend for the first time since 2009 after they lost 27-24 to Miami on Sunday and Patrick Mahomes and the Kansas City Chiefs beat the Los Angeles Chargers 31-21 to earn a first-round bye.

“We didn’t play the way we’re capable of playing and it ended up costing us,” Brady said. “Just too many bad mistakes.”

The Patriots (12-4) are the No. 3 overall seed in the AFC and will have to fix things in a hurry as they host Tennessee (9-7) next Saturday night.

“We’ve got a game next week, we’ve got to get ready to go,” Patriots safety Devin McCourty said. “Nobody should feel sorry for us, we shouldn’t feel sorry for ourselves. Our goal is to play in the playoffs. We got a shot next week at all of that.”

San Francisco earned the No. 1 seed and home-field advantage in the NFC playoffs with a 26-21 victory at Seattle. Jimmy Garoppolo and the NFC West champion 49ers (13-3) held on and sent Russell Wilson and the Seahawks (11-5) on the road to open the playoffs in the wild-card round next Sunday at Philadelphia.

“It’s a good step in the right direction,” Garoppolo said. “We’ve got a long way to go, though.”

The Titans clinched their spot by beating Houston 35-14, eliminating both Pittsburgh and Oakland in the process. All three teams had a chance at the playoffs, but Tennessee had the easiest path by needing to win — and got it against a Texans squad that rested several starters, including quarterback Deshaun Watson.

“I think it’s great when you can determine whether you get to continue to play football,” Titans coach Mike Vrabel said. “There was some great effort, but we’re going to have to improve and play better. Everything gets harder from here on out.”

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The last time New England played on wild-card weekend, it lost at home to the Ravens. The Patriots have never made it to the Super Bowl with Brady and coach Bill Belichick while playing in the opening round.

"We've got to move forward and get ready to go or the end of our season will be next week if we don't turn the page and play good football, way better than today," McCourty said. "Nobody feels sorry for the Patriots not getting a first-round bye in the playoffs."

Meanwhile, the Chiefs (12-4) are the No. 2 seed and will be able to watch the opening round, along with the top-seeded Baltimore Ravens (14-2).

"We'll step back, the guys will come in tomorrow, we'll have a team meeting, I'll give them a schedule for what's going on the next week here during the bye week," Chiefs coach Andy Reid said. "The main thing is we get work done, but we rest up and get ready for whoever we might play."

Kansas City's victory also locked Houston into the No. 4 seed, and the Texans (10-6) will host the Buffalo Bills (10-6) next Saturday.

Despite resting several starters, including quarterback Lamar Jackson, running back Mark Ingram, guard Marshal Yanda and safety Earl Thomas, Baltimore cruised past Pittsburgh 28-10 to ride into the playoffs on a 12-game winning streak.

"It's the best team in football in the regular season this year, but that doesn't count for anything in the next season," coach John Harbaugh said. "In the next season, we have to obviously go to work this week and become a better football team."

Green Bay earned a first-round bye in the NFC playoffs with a 23-20 victory at Detroit, the Packers' fifth straight win.

"We're hot," quarterback Aaron Rodgers said. "But you've got to start all over in the playoffs and it's all great football teams now, so the margin of error is even smaller."

Rodgers and the Packers (13-3) lost out on home-field advantage with San Francisco's win, but have the No. 2 seed in the conference.

"The NFC is wide open," Rodgers said.

New Orleans routed Carolina 42-10 to finish 13-3 in the regular season, but Drew Brees and Co. then had to wait for the result of the 49ers-Seahawks game to see what their playoff path would be.

The NFC South champions will be the No. 3 seed and will host Minnesota (10-6) in the wild-card round next Sunday.

Injury-ravaged Philadelphia (9-7) won the NFC East with a 34-17 win over the New York Giants, eliminating Dallas with the victory. The Eagles, with their second division title in three years, will host the Seahawks.

"This team, when it's crunch time this time of year, we get it done," Eagles defensive tackle Tim Jernigan said after his team finished the schedule with a four-game winning streak.

AP Pro Football Writer Rob Maaddi, and AP Sports Writers Dave Ginsburg, Kyle Hightower, Larry Lage, Kristie Rieken and Dave Skretta contributed.

More AP NFL: <https://apnews.com/NFL> and https://twitter.com/AP_NFL

In Afghanistan, jailed Taliban await peace, their freedom

By KATHY GANNON Associated Press

PUL-E-CHARKHI, Afghanistan (AP) — Thousands of Taliban prisoners jailed in Afghanistan as insurgents see a peace deal being hammered out between the United States and the Taliban as their ticket to freedom.

They know a prisoner release is a key pillar of any agreement that brings an end to Afghanistan's 18-year war, Washington's longest military engagement.

A list of about 5,000 Taliban prisoners has been given to the Americans and their release has been written into the agreement under discussion, said a Taliban official familiar with the on-again, off-again talks taking place in Qatar. He spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the media. U.S. and Afghan government officials have said a prisoner release is part of the negotiation.

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But some analysts say freeing prisoners could undermine peace in Afghanistan.

"There's a need for Afghan and U.S. officials to do their due diligence on any Taliban prisoners they're planning to release, in order to minimize the likelihood that they'll set free jihadists that can do destabilizing things and undercut a fledgling peace process," warned Michael Kugelman, deputy director of the Asia Program at the U.S.-based Wilson Center.

The Associated Press interviewed more than a dozen Taliban prisoners inside the notorious Pul-e-Charkhi prison on the eastern edge of the capital, Kabul. Several of them were nostalgic for the Taliban's Afghanistan, ruled by the mighty hand of their previous leader, the reclusive Mullah Mohammed Omar, who died several years ago.

But they also insisted that they accept it would not be the same now and that, though they still wanted what they call Islamic rule, they no longer call for some of their strict edicts, like the ban on education and on girls and women working.

"We want women to be educated, become engineers, we want women to work in every department," said one prisoner, Maulvi Niaz Mohammed, though he said the work must be "based on Islam." He said young Afghans should not fear the Taliban, "it is they who will build our country and develop it."

Taliban negotiators have taken a similar tone in the talks. But there is a deep distrust on both sides of the conflict and many in the public worry what will happen if the Taliban, who ruled for five years until they were toppled in the 2001 U.S.-led invasion, regain authority.

On Sunday, the Taliban ruling council agreed to a temporary cease-fire in Afghanistan, providing a window in which a peace agreement with the U.S. can be signed, Taliban officials said. They didn't say when it would begin.

The Taliban have well-organized communication networks inside Afghan prisons that record the latest arrests, province by province, as well as who is sick and who has died. It all gets delivered to a prisoners' commission, devoted to their release and headed by Mullah Nooruddin Turabi, who during the Taliban rule served as justice minister and the "virtue and vice" minister in charge of religious police.

During that time, he was widely feared. Turabi was known to personally enforce the movement's dictates, snatching music tapes from taxi drivers disobeying a ban on music and television, and stalking offices and businesses to search for violators who trimmed their beard or missed one of the five daily calls to prayer. Once in 1996, just days after the Taliban took control of Kabul from warring mujahedeen groups, when the AP was interviewing a Taliban fighter, Turabi slapped the hulking, 6-foot-tall fighter in the face for talking with a foreign woman journalist.

Built in the 1970s to house 5,000 prisoners, Pul-e-Charkhi now has 10,500 prisoners, according to the warden, Akhtar Noorzoi. They are packed in 11 cell blocks surrounded by turrets, guard towers and walls topped with razor wire.

The around 3,000 prisoners classified as Taliban are in their own block. The caution, even fear, felt by the guards and the administrators was unmistakable as they entered the Taliban's cell block, protected by a phalanx of guards in armored vests and helmets, carrying bulky weapons that fire tear gas shells. Behind them on the dimly lit stairs were another half dozen guards, also in vests and helmets, automatic weapons at the ready.

The prisoners had free rein in a room where they could mingle, pray and study. The room was lined with small desks at which the Taliban sat on the carpeted floor in traditional style.

The AP interviewed the prisoners in a nearby room, unshackled and with no guards or administrators present. The prisoners decided among themselves who among them would be interviewed, without interference — at least none visible — from the administration.

Still, they spoke in whispers as they complained of maltreatment by guards, some of whom they said wanted revenge for personal losses blamed on Taliban attacks, while others fear a Taliban return.

Maulvi Niaz Mohammad emerged as the leader among the prisoners, although no one identified him as such. He was convicted to 15 years. During the Taliban rule, he served with Qari Ahmadullah, a Taliban intelligence commander who controlled much of northern Afghanistan.

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He said barely 1,000 of the prisoners in the block are actually Taliban. The rest were accused of being sympathizers or members of the group, often to settle old scores; others were criminals.

One, Noorullah, 34, was sentenced to 20 years for killing his wife. He said that in prison he'd found comfort with the Taliban and sees their rule as preferable to the current government — though under the Taliban, he likely would have been sentenced to public execution at the hands of a relative of his wife.

He said that sentence would have been better, since now his family fears revenge attacks by his wife's relatives. "Why is it better now? I have to pay the judge, pay to the police, just so my family is not bothered."

One Taliban prisoner who gave his name only as Maulvi Sahab, saying he feared reprisals, said Taliban prisoners were beaten and taunted by guards. Dozens of prisoners were still in prison even after their sentences have been completed, sometimes for one week, one for a year, he said.

Medicine and medical treatment are often slow in arriving when they are for Taliban prisoners, he said. Every concession the Taliban have won has come through protests — refusing to return to cells or comply with orders until eventually some of their demands are met, including the use of mobile phones, which he and several others had in their hands as they spoke.

The prison warden, Noorzoi, rejected the Taliban litany of complaints. He said they promptly receive medical treatment, have access to literacy classes, religious schools and even a gymnasium and are served meat at least three times a week. He said a hospital is under construction.

Treatment, he insisted, was "better than some of them would get in their villages."

Pul-e-Charkhi prison is Afghanistan's most notorious, with a disturbing history of violence, mass executions and torture. Mass graves have been uncovered dating back to the purges carried out by Kabul's Soviet Union-backed governments of the late 1970s and 1980s. Torture cells and underground holding areas have been unearthed.

Prison authorities said today the prison is monitored by an Interior Ministry human rights commission and the International Committee of the Red Cross makes regular visits.

"Torture, mistreatment that's all a thing of the past" said Najeeb Nangyal, the Interior Ministry's director of media and public affairs.

Still, violent outbreaks are not uncommon.

In November, a riot broke out after authorities tried to confiscate cell phones and narcotics. When it ended, 16 prisoners were dead, many of them Taliban. The Taliban said they were targeted.

Analysts and even the United States' own Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction John F. Sopko said neither Afghanistan nor the U.S. is ready for the Taliban prisoners' release.

Every past attempt at re-integration has been costly and a failure.

A report released in September — one of several "Lessons Learned" treatises done by Sopko's team during America's 18-year and \$1 trillion involvement in Afghanistan — said Afghans on both sides of the conflict need to avoid the missteps of the past.

Sopko said Congress should consider funding reintegration only if a peace deal provides a framework for reintegrating ex-combatants, there is strong monitoring of the process and violence is dramatically reduced.

Associated Press Writer Tameem Akhgar in Kabul, Afghanistan, contributed to this report.

US strikes hit Iraqi militia blamed in contractor's death

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER and QASSIM ABDUL-ZAHRA Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. carried out military strikes in Iraq and Syria targeting an Iranian-backed Iraqi militia blamed for a rocket attack that killed an American contractor, Defense Secretary Mark Esper said Sunday.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the strikes send the message that the U.S. will not tolerate actions by Iran that jeopardize American lives.

"Precision defensive strikes" were conducted against five sites of Kataeb Hezbollah, or Hezbollah Brigades, Defense Department spokesman Jonathan Hoffman said in a statement earlier Sunday.

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The U.S. blames the militia for a rocket barrage Friday that killed a U.S. defense contractor at a military compound near Kirkuk, in northern Iraq. Officials said as many as 30 rockets were fired in Friday's assault.

Esper said the U.S. hit three of the militia's sites in western Iraq and two in eastern Syria, including weapon depots and the militia's command and control bases.

U.S. Air Force F-15 Strike Eagles carried out the strikes and all the aircraft safely returned to their home base, Esper said. At the ammunition storage facilities that were struck, significant secondary explosions were observed.

Pompeo, Esper and Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, flew to Palm Beach, Florida, after the operation to brief President Donald Trump.

Esper said they discussed with Trump "other options that are available" to respond to Iran.

"I would note also that we will take additional actions as necessary to ensure that we act in our own self-defense and we deter further bad behavior from militia groups or from Iran," Esper, who was accompanied by Pompeo and Milley, said in a brief statement to reporters in a ballroom at Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort, where the president is on a more than two-week winter break.

The national security officials did not answer any questions.

Pompeo said the "decisive response" makes clear that the U.S. "will not stand for the Islamic Republic of Iran to take actions that put American men and women in jeopardy."

Trump was at Mar-a-Lago but did not appear with his top national security officials. After Pompeo and Esper spoke, the president traveled to his private golf club in West Palm Beach. The White House did not immediately say why Trump returned to the club after spending nearly six hours there earlier Sunday.

Iraq's Joint Operations Command said in a statement that three U.S. airstrikes on Sunday evening Iraq time hit the headquarters of the Hezbollah Brigades at the Iraq-Syria border, killing four fighters.

Iraq's Hezbollah Brigades, a separate force from the Lebanese group Hezbollah, operate under the umbrella of the state-sanctioned militias known collectively as the Popular Mobilization Forces. Many of them are supported by Iran.

The Popular Mobilization Forces said Sunday that the U.S. strikes killed at least 19 of Kataeb Hezbollah's members.

Kataeb Hezbollah is led by Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, one of Iraq's most powerful men. He once battled U.S. troops and is now the deputy head of the Popular Mobilization Forces.

In 2009, the State Department linked him to the elite Quds Force of Iran's Revolutionary Guard, designated a foreign terrorist organization by President Donald Trump earlier this year.

The U.S. maintains some 5,000 troops in Iraq. They are there based on an invitation by the Iraqi government to assist and train in the fight against the Islamic State group.

The militia strike and U.S. counter-strike come as months of political turmoil roil Iraq. About 500 people have died in anti-government protests in recent months, most of them demonstrators killed by Iraqi security forces.

The mass uprisings prompted the resignation of Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi late last month. Abdul-Mahdi remains for now in a caretaker capacity.

Abdul-Mahdi had made no public comment on Friday's militia attack but condemned the U.S. retaliatory strike on Sunday. He called it a violation of Iraqi sovereignty and a "dangerous escalation that threatens the security of Iraq and the region."

In a statement, Abdul-Mahdi said Defense Secretary Mark Esper had called him about a half-hour before the U.S. strikes to tell him of U.S. intentions to hit bases of the militia suspected of being behind Friday's rocket attack. Abdul-Mahdi said in the statement he asked Esper to call off U.S. retaliation plans.

The statement said Iraqi President Barham Salih also received advance notice from a U.S. diplomat, and also asked unsuccessfully for Americans to call off it off.

Associated Press writers Darlene Superville in Palm Beach, Fla., and Zeina Karam in Beirut, Lebanon, contributed to this report.

This story has been corrected to show that about 500 people have died in recent anti-government protests, not nearly 600.

Congressman John Lewis says cancer is his latest battle

By BILL CORMIER Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — As a civil rights activist at 25, John Lewis was beaten so badly his skull was fractured and the TV images from an Alabama bridge in the 1960s forced a nation's awakening to racial discrimination. As a congressman today at 79, Lewis is facing a foe like none before: advanced pancreatic cancer.

The veteran Democrat congressman from Georgia has fought many struggles in his lifetime. Yet, he said, "I have never faced a fight quite like the one I have now," announcing Sunday in Washington that the cancer was detected earlier this month and confirmed in a diagnosis.

Lewis has had many battles, and this he views as one more dawning. He was arrested at least 40 times in the civil rights era, several more times as a congressman since being elected in 1986 and only recently he has been rallying to help reunite immigrant families separated by the Trump administration.

The youngest and last survivor of the Big Six civil rights activists, a group once led by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Lewis made clear that he has no plans to step aside from power while he undergoes treatment.

He said being elected to Congress "has been the honor of a lifetime" and that he will continue working for his constituents from Capitol Hill.

"I have been in some kind of fight — for freedom, equality, basic human rights — for nearly my entire life," he said.

Added Lewis: "I have a fighting chance."

He declined to say where he would receive cancer treatment or what that would entail. But he said he may not always be around the halls of Congress in the coming weeks.

"I may miss a few votes during this period, but with God's grace I will be back on the front lines soon," he said in asking for prayers.

Lewis also said he was "clear-eyed about the prognosis" even as doctors have told him that recent medical advances have made this type of cancer treatable in many cases. He added that "treatment options are no longer as debilitating as they once were."

The American Cancer Society estimates 3% of patients with stage 4 pancreatic cancer are alive five years after being diagnosed.

Sometimes called the "conscience of the Congress," Lewis led hundreds of protesters in the 1965 Bloody Sunday march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. He was at the head of the march when he was knocked to the ground and beaten by police. The nationally televised images forced the country's attention on the racial inequalities being fought by King and so many others.

Lewis turned to politics in 1981, when he was elected to the Atlanta City Council.

In 2011 he received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Barack Obama, who had marched with Lewis hand in hand in Selma on the 50th anniversary of the Bloody Sunday attack.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi was among those who sent her best wishes to Lewis after the announcement of his illness.

"We are all praying for you following this diagnosis. John, know that generations of Americans have you in their thoughts & prayers as you face this fight." She said in a statement. "We are all praying that you are comfortable. We know that you will be well."

Associated Press writer Calvin Woodward in Washington contributed to this report.

Kim calls for measures to protect North Korea's security

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — North Korean leader Kim Jong Un called for his military and diplomats to prepare unspecified "offensive measures" to protect the country's security and sovereignty, the North's state media said on Monday, before his end-of-year deadline for the Trump administration to make major concessions to salvage a fragile nuclear diplomacy.

Kim during a ruling Workers' Party meeting Sunday also "comprehensively and anatomically analyzed" problems arising in efforts to rebuild the North's moribund economy and presented tasks for "urgently correcting the grave situation of the major industrial sectors," the Korean Central News Agency said.

The plenary meeting of the party's Central Committee, which began on Saturday, is being closely watched amid concerns that Kim could suspend his deadlocked nuclear negotiations with the United States and take a more confrontational approach by lifting a self-imposed moratorium on nuclear and long-range missile tests.

The North has said the meeting, which will continue for at least another day, is intended for discussions on overcoming "manifold and harsh trials and difficulties."

Kim, who has said the North would pursue a "new path" if Washington persists with sanctions and pressure, is expected to announce major policy changes during his New Year's address on Wednesday.

The KCNA report did not describe any decisions made at the meeting or mention any specific remarks by Kim about the United States.

The North's official Rodong Sinmun newspaper published photos of Kim, wearing a white dress shirt and horn-rimmed glasses, speaking from a podium as hundreds of government and military officials jotted down his comments.

"Emphasizing the need to take positive and offensive measures for fully ensuring the sovereignty and security of the country as required by the present situation, (Kim) indicated the duties of the fields of foreign affairs, munitions industry and armed forces of the DPRK," the agency said in its English report, referring to North Korea's formal name, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

KCNA's Korean-language report said Kim called for "active and offensive" measures.

Kim also "comprehensively and anatomically analyzed the problems arising in the overall state building including the state management and economic construction in the present time," the agency said.

"He stressed the need to reasonably straighten the country's economic work system and order and establish a strong discipline and presented the tasks for urgently correcting the grave situation of the major industrial sectors of the national economy," the report said.

It added that Kim stressed the need for a "decisive" increase in agricultural production and gave out instructions for improving science, education and public health standards.

Lee Sang-min, a spokesman of South Korea's Unification Ministry, said Seoul is closely watching the North Korean party meeting, but he didn't speculate on what Kim's call for active and offensive security measures would have meant.

Cheong Seong-Chang, a senior analyst at South Korea's private Sejong Institute, said it was the first time under Kim's rule that a plenary meeting of the party's Central Committee continued for more than a day.

Kim has an urgent need to make major policy changes in the face of persistent U.S.-led sanctions and pressure, especially with a global crackdown on North Korean labor exports further straining his broken economy, Cheong said.

It's also likely that Kim during the party meeting reaffirmed a commitment to strengthen his nuclear and missile program, considering the commander of the North Korean army's strategic force was seen during Saturday's meeting, Cheong said.

Kim has met President Donald Trump three times in two years of high-stakes summitry, but the diplomacy has progressed little beyond their vague aspirational goal of a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula. At their last meeting in June, they agreed to resume talks. A working-level meeting in Sweden in October broke down with the North Koreans blaming their American counterparts for maintaining an "old stance and attitude."

The North said earlier this month it conducted two "crucial" tests at its long-range rocket launch facility, raising speculation it has been developing a new long-range missile or preparing a satellite launch.

After brain surgery, Jimmy Carter returns to hometown church

PLAINS, Ga. (AP) — Former President Jimmy Carter publicly appeared Sunday at the Georgia church where he worships for the first time since undergoing brain surgery in November.

The 95-year-old Carter and his wife of more than 70 years, Rosalynn, attended services at the Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains on Sunday, news outlets reported. Parishioners also prayed for the Carters, who were nestled into front-row seats at the church where Carter famously has taught Sunday school.

The nation's oldest-ever ex-president underwent surgery last month at Emory University Hospital in Atlanta to relieve pressure on his brain caused by bleeding from a fall.

Carter has faced several health issues in recent years. Earlier this month, he was treated at a hospital for a urinary tract infection. In October, he was hospitalized for a fall that fractured his pelvis and another fall in which he hit his head and required 14 stitches. A previous fall required he get hip surgery. In 2015, he was diagnosed with melanoma. After having parts of his liver removed and undergoing radiation, immunotherapy and treatment for brain lesions, he announced that he was cancer-free.

Actress Sara Gilbert separates from wife, singer Linda Perry

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Actress Sara Gilbert has filed for legal separation from her wife of five years, singer and songwriter Linda Perry.

Gilbert filed the separation documents in Los Angeles Superior Court on Friday. The papers cite irreconcilable differences as the reason for the split, and requests that neither woman receive spousal support.

No details were given on custody arrangements for the couple's 4-year-old son Rhodes.

Gilbert, 44-year-old star of "The Conners," former star of "Roseanne" and creator and former co-host of daytime talk show "The Talk," began dating Perry in 2011 and they married in 2014.

Perry is the 54-year-old former singer of 4 Non Blondes who has written hits for Christina Aguilera, Gwen Stefani and Pink.

Efron: 'I bounced back' from illness in Papua New Guinea

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Zac Efron said he has "bounced back" after an illness while filming a show in Papua New Guinea.

On his Twitter and Instagram accounts Sunday, the 32-year-old "High School Musical" actor addressed recent media reports that he had been rushed to the hospital in a serious emergency while filming his new reality adventure series, "Killing Zac Efron."

"Very thankful to everyone who has reached out. I did get sick in Papua New Guinea but I bounced back quick and finished an amazing 3 weeks in P.N.G.," Efron said along with a picture of himself smiling and waving amid a group of local children.

He gave no details on what the sickness had been or what treatment he underwent.

"I'm home for the holidays with my friends and family," Efron said. "Thanks for all the love and concern, see you in 2020!"

Jewish leaders urge action after another 'senseless' attack

GARY FIELDS, LUIS ANDRES HENAO and KIMBERLEE KRUESI Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — When a suspect walked into the home of a rabbi celebrating Hanukkah and stabbed five celebrants it was the latest in a week of anti-Semitic attacks in the nation's most demographically diverse area — and an incident that reverberated across the country.

"Again, here we are: mourning another act of senseless anti-Semitic violence committed against our community and praying for those who were the victims of this hate," Anti-Defamation League CEO Jonathan

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Greenblatt said in a statement Sunday following the attack a day earlier in Monsey, New York.

"This is at least the 10th anti-Semitic incident to hit the New York/New Jersey area in just the last week. When will enough be enough? These heinous attacks make something abundantly clear: The Jewish community needs greater protection," Greenblatt said.

Since the Dec. 10 massacre at a kosher grocery store in New Jersey there have been 19 anti-Semitic incidents in the U.S., including 16 in New York and New Jersey, according to the ADL's Tracker of Anti-Semitic Incidents. The tracker is a compilation of recent cases of anti-Jewish vandalism, harassment and assault reported to or detected by the group.

Most concerning: Ten of those incidents have occurred in New York since Dec. 23 and involved assaults or threatened violence. The ADL defines assaults as incidents where people's bodies are targeted with violence accompanied by evidence of anti-Semitic animus or in a manner that attacks Jews for their religious affiliation.

To put the week-long toll in context, the New York Police Department recorded 19 hate-crime felony assault complaints in the first three quarters of 2019.

The surge of high-profile attacks on the Jewish community, including shooting rampages at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh in October 2018, and at a synagogue in Poway, California, in April, have caused consternation around the country.

The main entrance to the B'nai Jacob synagogue in Middletown, Pennsylvania, remained locked on Sunday while congregants celebrated Hanukkah and held a minute of silence for the victims at Monsey's Netzach Yisroel synagogue.

The Middletown congregation will be installing new security cameras Monday, said the synagogue's caretaker, Horris Toser. They also plan to implement other state police recommendations to make the facility more secure.

"So far, they've only shot our windows with BB guns, but you never know these days," Toser said. "I've never heard of so many anti-Semitic attacks as I hear about these days. My parents talked a lot about it during the (World War II) war. It's very sad."

Ed Beck, the synagogue's vice president, wants to organize a million-person march against anti-Semitism and stage it around the globe. "It's scary. Identifiable Jews are no longer safe in many places," he said.

Saul Strosberg, a senior rabbi at Congregation Sherith Israel in Nashville, Tennessee, said his community is security focused as well and careful about keeping doors locked and monitoring the perimeters around the building.

"We're extremely vigilant about all sorts of unusual behavior now," he said.

He added that he's seen a trend of fewer schedules being posted on synagogue websites and armed guards stationed at entrances.

"It's just one of the realities of being Jewish," he said.

Ofir Dayan, 25, president of Students Supporting Israel at New York's Columbia University, said the concern is strong among college students, adding that she has been harassed.

"The demonization of Jews and Israel on college campuses and social media doesn't stop there. It is being received and propagated in the real world and causes anti-Semitic extremists to take the life of innocent people, just because they are Jewish," she told The Associated Press.

Dayan called on leaders at every level, from college campuses to the federal government, to speak out against the acts.

The Congressional Caucus on Black-Jewish Relations condemned the Monsey attack "in the strongest possible terms" and said the surge in anti-Semitic attacks is a "disturbing trend both here in the United States and abroad." The National Action Network founded by Rev. Al Sharpton is planning a news conference Monday with black religious and civil rights leaders and Jewish allies to denounce anti-Semitism.

The Simon Wiesenthal Center issued a statement urging President Donald Trump to instruct the FBI to create a special task force to address the violence. Concern over the attacks prompted Gov. Andrew Cuomo to direct the New York State Police to patrol Orthodox Jewish neighborhoods across the state.

Still, noted Mark S. Bloom, rabbi at Temple Beth Abraham in Oakland, California: "You can't up security

every time an incident happens because they happen so often.”

Senior Rabbi Marcia Zimmerman of Temple Israel in Minneapolis, Minnesota’s largest Jewish congregation, said Hanukkah is about Jews fighting for their faith and perhaps the antidote is to “make sure we all have an understanding of each other.”

Evan R. Bernstein, the regional director of the Anti-Defamation League of New York and New Jersey, said while there are no studies to fully explain why the incidents are occurring, he believes part of the issue is changing neighborhood demographics and stereotypes about Jews. He said there is a lack of understanding of who the Hasidic groups are as they expand in communities in the region.

The reform and conservative Jews of past decades seemed more socially integrated into the neighborhoods while the more Orthodox groups are more insular, he said.

“It’s not because they don’t like anybody. They function different,” Bernstein said. “They just want to practice their religion in American society but they aren’t as overtly social as other Jewish groups were. That’s not a reason for a group to be marginalized, assaulted or attacked on social media. They have every reason to practice their religion the way they want to practice. They shouldn’t have to change.”

The ADL is working on several initiatives to change the perceptions and misconceptions. One is its “No Place for Hate” anti-bias, anti-bullying initiative, which works in schools. Another includes working with juvenile offenders who are involved in some of the incidents to understand what they did and why.

“We need to get better facts,” Bernstein said.

Rabbi Daniel Greyber of Beth El Synagogue in Durham, North Carolina, said he would keep lighting his family’s menorah out on the front porch on Sunday as a sign of solidarity with the Monsey congregation and Jews worldwide.

“When an Orthodox community in New York is under attack there is a feeling that Jews everywhere are under attack,” he said. “I never want somebody in my community to be afraid for being Jewish.”

Henao reported from Middletown, Pennsylvania, and Kruesi from Nashville, Tennessee. Associated Press writers Jeff Baenen in Minneapolis, Gary Robertson in Raleigh, North Carolina, and Daisy Nguyen in San Francisco, contributed to this report.

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Taliban council agrees to cease-fire in Afghanistan

By **KATHY GANNON** and **RAHIM FAIEZ** Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — The Taliban’s ruling council agreed Sunday to a temporary cease-fire in Afghanistan, providing a window in which a peace agreement with the United States can be signed, officials from the insurgent group said. They didn’t say when it would begin.

A cease-fire had been demanded by Washington before any peace agreement could be signed. A peace deal would allow the U.S. to bring home its troops from Afghanistan and end its 18-year military engagement there, America’s longest.

The White House said it would have no comment.

The U.S. wants any deal to include a promise from the Taliban that Afghanistan would not be used as a base by terrorist groups. The U.S. currently has an estimated 12,000 troops in Afghanistan.

The Taliban chief must approve the cease-fire decision but that was expected. The duration of the cease-fire was not specified but it was suggested it would last for 10 days. It was also not specified when the cease-fire would begin.

Four members of the Taliban negotiating team met for a week with the ruling council before they agreed on the brief cease-fire. The negotiating team returned Sunday to Qatar where the Taliban maintain their political office and where U.S. special peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad has been holding peace talks with the religious militia since September, 2018.

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Talks were suspended in September when both sides seemed on the verge of signing a peace pact. However, a surge in violence in the capital Kabul killed a U.S. soldier, prompting President Donald Trump to declare the deal "dead." Talks resumed after Trump made a surprise visit to Afghanistan at the end of November announcing the Taliban were ready to talk and agree to a reduction in violence.

Khalilzad returned to Doha at the beginning of December. It was then that he proposed a temporary halt to hostilities to pave the way to an agreement being signed, according to Taliban officials.

Taliban officials familiar with the negotiations spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to media outlets.

A key pillar of the agreement, which the U.S. and Taliban have been hammering out for more than a year, is direct negotiations between Afghans on both sides of the conflict.

Those intra-Afghan talks were expected to be held within two weeks of the signing of a U.S.-Taliban peace deal. They will decide what a post-war Afghanistan will look like.

The first item on the agenda is expected to address how to implement a cease-fire between the Taliban and Afghanistan's National Security Forces. The negotiations, however, were expected to be prickly and will cover a variety of thorny issues, including rights of women, free speech, and changes to the country's constitution.

The intra-Afghan talks would also lay out the fate of tens of thousands of Taliban fighters and the heavily armed militias belonging to Afghanistan's warlords. Those warlords have amassed wealth and power since the Taliban were ousted from power in 2001 by the U.S.-led coalition. They were removed after Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida carried out the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States. The Taliban had harbored bin Laden, although there was no indication they were aware of al-Qaida's plans to attack the United States.

Even as the Taliban were talking about ceasing hostilities, insurgents carried out an attack in northern Afghanistan on Sunday that killed at least 17 local militiamen.

The attack apparently targeted a local militia commander who escaped unharmed, said Jawad Hajri, a spokesman for the governor of Takhar province, where the attack took place late Saturday.

Local Afghan militias commonly operate in remote areas, and are under the command of either the defense or interior ministries.

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid claimed responsibility for the attack.

Last week, a U.S. soldier was killed in combat in the northern Kunduz province. The Taliban claimed they were behind a fatal roadside bombing that targeted American and Afghan forces in Kunduz. The U.S. military said the soldier was not killed in an IED attack but died seizing a Taliban weapon's cache.

The U.S. military in its daily report of military activity said airstrikes overnight Sunday killed 13 Taliban in attacks throughout the country.

Taliban as well as Afghan National Security Forces aided by U.S. air power have carried out daily attacks against each other

The Taliban frequently target Afghan and U.S. forces, as well as government officials. But scores of Afghan civilians are also killed in the cross-fire or by roadside bombs planted by militants. The United Nations has called on all sides in the conflict to reduce civilian casualties. The world body said increased U.S. airstrikes and ground operations by Afghan National Security Forces, as well as relentless Taliban attacks, have contributed to an increase in civilian casualties.

Last year, Afghanistan was the world's deadliest conflict.

Gannon reported from Islamabad.

Mexico City zoo welcomes second baby giraffe of the year

By **DIEGO DELGADO** and **AMY GUTHRIE** Associated Press

MEXICO CITY (AP) — The Chapultepec Zoo in Mexico City is celebrating its second baby giraffe of the year, already as tall as a full-grown human.

The female giraffe was unveiled last week after a mandatory quarantine period following her Oct. 23 birth. She will be named via a public vote to generate empathy with the little cow, zoo director Juan Carlos Sánchez Olmos said Sunday.

The 96-year-old zoo on the grounds of the capital's central park has a knack for breeding creatures in captivity: This year it welcomed 170 baby animals, including six Mexican gray wolves, which are in danger of extinction.

"A new birth of a character as unique, as charismatic as a giraffe becomes emblematic—a flag for conservation, for the prestige of the zoo," said Sánchez Olmos while four grown giraffes happily munched branches and leaves behind him.

Giraffes are considered "vulnerable" because the species faces significant habitat loss in the 17 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, where they reside.

Unlike the wolves, which will be released into the Sierra de San Pedro Mártir National Park in Baja California, the giraffes are expected to spend their lives under observation in a dusty patch of the Chapultepec Zoo.

A team of professionals—including nutritionists, veterinarians and biologists like Sánchez Olmos—takes care of more than 1,000 animals in the zoo, which sits under the flight path of jetliners that roar overhead.

As Sánchez Olmos detailed the zoo's mission to not just educate and amuse, but also conserve species, caretaker Alejandro González offered long branches from a pomegranate tree to four hungry giraffes. The tallest of the pack eagerly yanked the branches from González's hands.

"What did I tell you?" the caretaker said, looking the tall giraffe square in the eyes. "Take it easy, please."

If González had his way, the new addition to the herd of giraffes would be called Sarita. At least, that's what he calls her.

The long-necked creatures are a favorite fixture at the zoo. The public voted in April to name the first baby giraffe of the year Jirafifita, which translates as Uppity Little Giraffe - a play on the president's favorite word for dismissing critics.

"Fifi" is slang for uppity or posh. Populist President Andrés Manuel López Obrador frequently uses the word to describe opposition politicians and others who question his decisions.

Buttigieg critiques Biden's 'judgment' on Iraq War vote

By **THOMAS BEAUMONT** Associated Press

KNOXVILLE, Iowa (AP) — Democratic presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg on Sunday called former Vice President Joe Biden's vote to authorize the Iraq War part of the nation's "worst foreign policy decision" of the millennial mayor's lifetime.

Buttigieg, the mayor of South Bend, Indiana, was responding to a question about how his foreign policy experience measured up to others' in the Democratic race, specifically Biden, who was a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee when the U.S. went to war.

"This is an example of why years in Washington is not always the same thing as judgment," Buttigieg said while recording the program "Iowa Press" on Iowa Public Television, according to a transcript. "He supported the worst foreign policy decision made by the United States in my lifetime, which was the decision to invade Iraq."

As Buttigieg has risen to the top of voter preference polls in Iowa, where the presidential nominating contests begin in a little more than a month, some of his rivals have pointed to his governing experience being limited to a city of about 102,000 as a liability.

Biden, who represented Delaware in the Senate, voted in October 2002 for the resolution to authorize the use of force in Iraq. The U.S.-led invasion the following March became a point of Democratic criticism for those in the party who supported the resolution.

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As a candidate for president in 2007, Biden said he would support legislation to repeal the resolution, which remains in effect.

Biden's campaign had no comment on Buttigieg's remarks.

In the middle of a three-day trip through central and eastern Iowa, Buttigieg stopped short of suggesting Biden's vote demonstrated a lack of foreign policy judgment required to be president.

"It's certainly a question that reflects on foreign policy judgment at a time like this when it's so precarious for the people of the U.S.," Buttigieg told reporters after a campaign event in Knoxville, Iowa. "Obviously, my judgment is different when it comes to a lot of these issues."

NTSB: Poor condition of wreckage will slow plane crash probe

The lack of a distress call and flight data recorder coupled with mangled and charred wreckage will make finding the cause of a fiery airplane crash in Louisiana extremely challenging, federal officials said Sunday.

National Transportation Safety Board Vice Chairman Bruce Landsberg said at a press conference that it could take 12 to 18 months to figure out why the two-engine Piper Cheyenne fell from the sky about a minute after taking off from the Lafayette Regional Airport on Saturday.

The plane crashed near a post office and caught fire in seconds, leaving the ground littered with burning wreckage. Five of the six people on board were killed. The plane was en route to the Peach Bowl playoff game in Atlanta between LSU and Oklahoma. Among those killed was sports broadcaster Carley McCord, the daughter-in-law of LSU coach Steven Ensminger.

"We'll be looking very carefully at the pilot's qualifications, the training that they had, medical certification and also the history on the aircraft and its maintenance records," Landsberg said. "We have two videos that have been turned into us, and we will be analyzing those."

Landsberg said that he walked to the crash site on Sunday morning and found debris scattered about a quarter of a mile.

It was a "very sobering situation," he said.

Investigators said much of the aircraft was crushed and consumed by fire after it crashed. NTSB officials said they know of no distress calls made by the pilot or of the existence of a flight data recorder.

"The avionics equipment on board the aircraft was pretty badly damaged," Landsberg said. "There is no flight data recorder that we know of at this time. We'll obviously be looking at that, but at this point there's not a lot to go on."

The airplane climbed to 900 feet, then descended to 700 feet — a dangerously low altitude in the area, Landsberg said.

The plane went down in a part of the city with a scattering of banks, fast food chains and other businesses. Three people on the ground were also hurt. Local authorities identified the sole survivor from the plane as a 37-year-old man. He was hospitalized but his condition was not immediately known.

Lafayette is the fourth-largest city in Louisiana with a population of about 130,000, according to the 2018 census. It is located about 135 miles west of New Orleans.

Bali bombers' brother, bomb widow become friends, seek peace

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

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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."

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

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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."

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.

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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.

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.

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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 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

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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 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.

Waiting game: 15 days between CFP semifinals, championship

By RALPH D. RUSSO AP College Football Writer

GLENDALE, Ariz. (AP) — The matchup is set for a tantalizing College Football Playoff national championship game.

On one side, defending champion Clemson, with its 29-game winning streak. On the other, unbeaten and No. 1 LSU, with its record-setting offense and Heisman Trophy winner.

But first, we interrupt this playoff for a 15-day break that is far from ideal.

LSU and Clemson will play the final game of the 2019 college football season on Jan. 13 in New Orleans after winning semifinals Saturday night.

Heisman winner Joe Burrow and his Tigers routed No. 4 Oklahoma 63-28 at the Peach Bowl. Clemson's No. 3 Tigers beat No. 2 Ohio State 29-23 in a Fiesta Bowl thriller.

"The challenge is keeping the conversation in the forefront against two weeks of NFL," said Nick Dawson, ESPN's vice president of programming and acquisitions.

ESPN will try to keep the college football conversation going with lower-level bowl games scheduled for Jan. 2, 3, 4 and 6.

The LendingTree Bowl in Mobile, Alabama, matching Louisiana-Lafayette and Miami (Ohio) will essentially

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be a three-hour promo for LSU-Clemson.

"We launch with a championship game spot on Monday and have really two weeks to run it and really sell the matchup," Dawson said. "We think that could be an advantage for us."

ESPN also will have the final three episodes of "Inside the College Football Playoff" available on its subscription online streaming service, ESPN+. The behind-the-scenes-with-the-teams series will now follow Clemson's and LSU's championship game preparation.

The CFP schedule did not end up here by design. It was a correction.

When the College Football Playoff was crafted by the Football Bowl Subdivision conference commissioners in 2012 and '13, they decided the semifinals would be played on Dec. 31 two out of every three years. The semifinals would rotate through six bowl games and when they were played at the Rose and Sugar bowls, as they will next season, the games would be on Jan. 1.

That's the perfect spot: a national holiday when most people are off from work, being couch potatoes after ringing in the New Year.

But the conferences that partner with the Rose (Pac-12 and Big Ten) and Sugar (Southeastern and Big 12) bowls chose to lock their showcase games into those Jan. 1 time slots for the 12-year duration of the playoff. Even when they weren't hosting semifinals.

That led to the ill-fated idea to reinvent New Year's Eve as a night to watch college football. It did not work and after one season the plan was scrapped. Future schedules in which the semifinals were planned to be played on Dec. 31 were moved to the closest Saturday, unless New Year's Eve was a Saturday.

This year's schedule became particularly problematic because while the semifinals could be moved up to Dec. 28, the championship game could not be moved from Jan. 13.

CFP officials have said the Superdome in New Orleans was not able to accommodate the switch, which would have provided a more normal eight-day lead-up.

So instead, the teams have more than two weeks between games, and two rounds of NFL playoffs will be played in the meantime.

Fiesta Bowl coaches Dabo Swinney of Clemson and Ryan Day of Ohio State said before their game they would prefer consistency in playoff scheduling and the semifinals to be played Jan. 1 always.

"I know that the schedule, the NFL or whatever, I don't know what all dictates all that stuff, but this year's been a little different because of the way it was laid out and the national championship," Swinney said Friday. "There's a bye week this year. That's another difference that the teams are going to have to manage in preparation for that because it is a little unique."

CFP executive director Bill Hancock said he was not concerned about fans losing interest due to the longer-than-usual layoff.

"I don't think so because the championship game is so big and I learned a long time ago not to worry about things you can't control," he said. "I think the coaches are going to appreciate it. More time to get ready. More time to rest up."

For LSU, running back Clyde Edwards-Helaire has been nursing a hamstring injury. He played sparingly in the blowout of Oklahoma and looked OK.

For Clemson, quarterback Trevor Lawrence took some shots carrying the ball a career-high 16 times in the intense, hard-hitting game against Ohio State. The Tigers' top two receivers, Tee Higgins (evaluated for a concussion) and Justyn Ross (arm), were both banged up.

"We're going to celebrate this one, and then give these guys a couple of days off," Swinney said Saturday night. "Then we're going to get focused on trying to find a way to win one more. It's going to be a heck of a task, but we're thankful that we got the opportunity."

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Somalia blast kills one sister, badly injures the other

MOHAMED SHEIKH NOR Associated Press

MOGADISHU, Somalia (AP) — The two Somali sisters were studying to be doctors. They were in a minibus on their way to university on Saturday morning when their world exploded.

Now, 22-year-old Amina Mohamud is in critical condition. Her sister, 25-year-old Fadumo Mohamud, is dead. Their mother calls Saturday the darkest day of her life.

Families mourned in Mogadishu on Sunday after a truck bomb at a busy security checkpoint detonated during rush hour. University students, the future of a country rebuilding from decades of conflict, made up most of the 79 people killed.

It was the worst attack in Mogadishu, often the target of the al-Shabab extremist group, in more than two years. International condemnation has poured in. Pope Francis on Sunday appealed to the world for prayers.

And the mother of Amina and Fadumo, Sharifo Roble, was distraught as her younger daughter was placed on a stretcher and wheeled toward a plane that would take more than a dozen other severely wounded people to Turkey for desperately needed care. They included small children.

"I sent my two daughters to university yesterday. One died in the blast and the other one is in severe condition," Roble said. "I had to struggle with their upbringing because I was acting as both mother and father." The sisters' father died years ago.

Roble can only pray that her younger daughter one day will come home and continue her studies. Somalia needs it, she said.

Health authorities in Mogadishu have pleaded for blood donations to help treat the 125 people wounded in the bombing, which occurred after a weekend as the Muslim nation returned to school and work.

Nearly every student on the Mohamud sisters' minibus was killed. The truck bomb exploded next to it after police at the checkpoint blocked the truck from entering the city, Somalia's police chief said.

Families across Mogadishu held funerals the same day.

Others, like Roble, joined Somali President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed in seeing off their badly hurt loved ones on the Turkish plane. The plane also held the bodies of two Turkish brothers who died in the blast.

Another plane was expected to arrive from Qatar to airlift others to treatment, Somali officials said.

"We pray for those martyred in this attack to rest in heaven," said Somalia's security minister, Abukar Islow Duale, "and those who were injured to have quick recovery."

The al-Qaida-linked al-Shabab, which controls parts of Somalia and whose reach extends to attacking luxury malls and schools in neighboring Kenya, has remained silent. It has not claimed responsibility as usual.

Al-Shabab also was blamed for the devastating truck bombing in Mogadishu in October 2017 that killed more than 500 people. The group never claimed responsibility for the blast that led to widespread public outrage.

Some analysts said al-Shabab didn't dare claim credit for the 2017 attack as its strategy of trying to sway public opinion by exposing government weakness had badly backfired.

The King reigns: LeBron James is AP's male athlete of decade

By TIM REYNOLDS AP Basketball Writer

He left Cleveland for Miami, finally became a champion, went back to his beloved northeast Ohio, delivered on another title promise, then left for the Los Angeles Lakers and the next challenge. He played in eight straight finals. No NBA player won more games or more MVP awards over the last 10 years than he did. He started a school. He married his high school sweetheart.

"That's all?" LeBron James asked, feigning disbelief.

No, that's not all. Those were just some highlights of the last 10 years. There were many more, as the man called "King" spent the last decade reigning over all others — with no signs of slowing down.

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James is The Associated Press male athlete of the decade, adding his name to a list that includes Tiger Woods, Wayne Gretzky and Arnold Palmer. He was a runaway winner in a vote of AP member sports editors and AP beat writers, easily outpacing runner-up Tom Brady of the New England Patriots.

"You add another 10 years of learning and adversity, pitfalls, good, great, bad, and any smart person who wants to grow will learn from all those experiences," James, who turns 35 Monday, told the AP. "A decade ago, I just turned 25. I'm about to be 35 and I'm just in a better (place) in my life and have a better understanding of what I want to get out of life."

Usain Bolt of Jamaica was third for dominating the sprints at the 2012 and 2016 Olympics, soccer superstar Lionel Messi was fourth and Michael Phelps — the U.S. swimmer who retired as history's most decorated Olympian with 28 medals, 23 gold — was fifth.

James was revealed as the winner Sunday, one day after Serena Williams was announced as the AP's female athlete of the decade. In his 17th season, he's on pace to lead the league in assists for the first time while remaining among the NBA's scoring leaders.

"When LeBron James is involved," Denver coach Michael Malone said, "I'm never surprised."

Including playoffs, no one in the NBA scored more points than James in the last 10 years. He started the decade 124th on the league's all-time scoring list. He's now about to pass Kobe Bryant for No. 3. No. 2 Karl Malone and No. 1 Kareem Abdul-Jabbar are within reach.

Is Abdul-Jabbar in his sights? Is catching him the new decade's goal?

"I would be lying if I said I don't see it," James said. "Obviously I'm not trying to say, 'OK, well if I play this amount of time, if I average this' ... I'm not doing that because I've never done that with my career. I've always just kind of let it happen. Whatever happens, happens. But I see it. I do see it."

His work ethic, even now, makes even those closest to him marvel.

Here's a typical day this past summer for James, who remains obsessed with working even though fame and fortune found him long ago: He'd wake up at 3 a.m. and be at the Warner Bros. lot by 3:45 — where a weight room and court, built just for him, were waiting. He'd be lifting by 4 a.m., getting shots up by 5:30 and be ready to start another day of shooting the remake of "Space Jam" that he has been planning for years by 7 a.m.

"That's who he is," said Mike Mancias, one of the longest-tenured and most trusted members of James' inner circle, tasked for more than 15 years with keeping James fit. "He does whatever it takes when it comes to fulfilling his commitments to everything — especially his game and his craft."

The 2010s for James started with "The Decision," the widely criticized televised announcement of his choice to leave Cleveland for Miami. (Lost in the hubbub: The show raised more than \$2.5 million for charity.) He was with the Heat for four years, went to the NBA Finals all four times with Dwyane Wade and Chris Bosh, finally won the title in 2012 — "it's about damn time," he said at the trophy celebration — and led the way in a Game 7 win over San Antonio to go back-to-back the following year.

"He grew immensely here as a leader," Miami coach Erik Spoelstra said. "He impacted winning as much as with his leadership as he did with his talent. I think that was the most important thing he learned with us. And he's been able to take that to different franchises and continue using that as a template."

Cleveland was devastated when he left. It forgave him. James returned home in 2014, took Cleveland to four consecutive finals, then led the Cavaliers to the 2016 title and came up with one of the biggest plays of his life by pulling off a chase-down block of Golden State's Andre Iguodala in the final seconds of Game 7 of that series.

And in 2018, he was off to LA.

Going Hollywood made so much sense — he's making movies, has a production company, has a program called "The Shop" as part of his 'Uninterrupted' platform featuring an array of guests from Drake to California Gov. Gavin Newsom, who signed a bill on the show that will allow college athletes to get paid for the use of their likeness and sign endorsement deals.

"There's a lot of moments from this decade that would be up there, winning the two Miami championships, winning a championship in Cleveland, the chase-down block," James said. "But the best moment?"

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Definitely marrying Savannah. That would be No. 1.”

James and longtime partner Savannah Brinson got married six years ago. They already had two sons — both are very good basketball players already — and added a daughter in 2014.

James also spent most of the last decade as a lightning rod for critics.

He used his voice often on social matters, speaking out after the killing of unarmed Florida teenager Trayvon Martin and campaigning for Hillary Clinton. He supported Colin Kaepernick’s methods of protesting police brutality and racial injustice. Most recently, he was criticized by many — including top U.S. lawmakers — for his remarks after Houston general manager Daryl Morey sparked a massive rift between the NBA and China by sending out a tweet supporting pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong.

“I don’t live in regret,” James said. “There’s no moment in this last decade that I wish I could have back. If a situation was bad or you feel like you could have done better, then I learned from it.”

He doesn’t know how much longer he’ll play. He laments missing time with his children. His “I Promise” school that opened in 2018 in his hometown of Akron, Ohio, has been an immediate success story, and he wants to see that enterprise continue growing.

Some love him. Some don’t. He doesn’t mind.

“When you believe in your calling or you believe in yourself, then it doesn’t matter what other people say or how other people feel,” James said. “And if you allow that to stop you or deter you from your mission, then you don’t get anywhere.”

And in the 2010s, nothing deterred James.

Pop culture in 2010s marked gains in diversity, inclusion

By JOCELYN NOVECK AP National Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — When the family-friendly Hallmark Channel recently pulled, under pressure from a conservative group, a set of ads featuring a kiss between two happy brides at the altar, backlash was swift — to say the least.

Within hours, stars like Ellen DeGeneres and William Shatner were tweeting in protest to their many followers, and LGBT advocates were mobilizing a boycott via social media. This was on Saturday; by Sunday evening, Hallmark had reversed its decision, and apologized for what it acknowledged as a mistake.

Whatever it says about corporate missteps, the episode also says something about how our popular culture has changed in a decade, with diversity and inclusion concerns taking center stage, says Sarah Kate Ellis, president of GLAAD, which advocates for LGBT people in Hollywood and played a key role in Hallmark’s reversal.

“This decade has been about diversity and inclusion — at least the starting of the conversation,” says Ellis. “Communities who have been left out of the seats at the table for decades and decades are finally starting to find their voice, and their footing.” And a major element, obviously, is the power of social media: “It enables us to connect with each other, find each other and organize,” Ellis says.

Speaking of viral protests, this was also the decade of #OscarsSoWhite, the hashtag launched by activist April Reign in 2015 when none of the 20 acting nominees were actors of color. Incredibly, the same thing happened in 2016, forcing the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences to launch a major membership overhaul aimed at diversifying its overwhelmingly white, male, older ranks.

The following year, “Moonlight,” about the coming-of-age of a gay black man, won best picture (after “La La Land” was ... oh, never mind) and the winner list was more diverse. But true racial diversity in entertainment remains an elusive goal, despite slow progress.

“Things have certainly improved,” says Gil Robertson, president of the African American Film Critics Association. “Ten years ago, you didn’t have an Ava DuVernay, a Jordan Peele, a Shonda Rhimes, a Kerry Washington,” he says. “And my God, you couldn’t have even imagined ‘Pose,’” he says, referring to the Ryan Murphy TV series set in the ‘80s ballroom culture with the biggest LGBTQ cast ever assembled for a scripted show.

“The door has opened,” he says, adding that inroads have also been made for Asian American actors

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and stories, but less so for Latinos. "Has the industry reached the place that we want it to be? No, but things have gotten better."

In her speech at the 2018 Oscars, soon after the Harvey Weinstein scandal launched the #MeToo era, Frances McDormand urged women to demand an "inclusion rider" in contracts to help achieve gender parity. Almost two years later, evidence of progress for women in front of and behind the camera is slow but steady. The entry of streaming giants like Netflix has accelerated the pace of change, says Stacy L. Smith, director of the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative at the University of Southern California.

An example: last year, 39 of the top 100 Hollywood films were led or co-led by a female character, Smith says; in 2007 the number was 20, so it has essentially doubled in a decade. And there is progress behind the camera, too. "We're really seeing changes, slow but real significant movement in some of these institutions," she says.

Progress has also been seen in the music business, in diversity of film critics, and in scripted TV, she says. And yet there are areas sorely lacking: representation of female characters over 40 in films, for example, and women of color. And trans women characters are rarely seen in major films.

"Every group should be able to see themselves onscreen," Smith says.

A LONG WAY SINCE "ELLEN"

It's hard to imagine that back in 1997 when DeGeneres came out on her TV show, the words "I'm gay" were so groundbreaking. "We were all but non-existent in popular culture a few decades ago, and now we're very much grounded in popular culture," says Ellis, of GLAAD.

While no milestone this past decade matches the import of that "Ellen" moment, the decade began with the launch — actually in 2009 — of both "Glee," which put a spotlight on LGBT youth, and "Modern Family," which introduced the couple of Mitchell and Cam, two dads who adopt a Vietnamese daughter. "These were really big moments," Ellis says. Another was last year's best-actor Emmy for Billy Porter for "Pose," the first openly gay black man to win the award.

Inroads also were made in children's programming. "Doc McStuffins," the Disney Junior children's cartoon, featured a family led by an interracial, lesbian couple, and the Disney Channel kids' show "Andi Mack" introduced a key gay character.

And it was only a quick glance between male characters, but "Beauty and the Beast" took the plunge and actually showed a gay moment. "It's a step in the right direction," says Ellis. Can Elsa's (hoped-for) coming-out in the "Frozen" franchise be far behind?

Caitlyn Jenner's revelation in 2015 that she was transgender helped shine a light on that community, and popular shows like "Orange is the New Black," "Transparent" and "Pose" featured transgender characters. TV, though, has been far ahead of film. "The top Hollywood studios have always been a decade behind," says Ellis. The reasons, she says: a years-long development pipeline for movies, the huge budgets of big films, and Hollywood's fear of breaking its own comfortable formulas. But things are slowly moving.

BEYOND #OSCARSSOWHITE

America is increasingly diverse. Movie audiences are increasingly diverse. And diverse movies make money, because people like to see stories and characters that reflect their own lives.

Despite all this, says Darnell Hunt, dean of social sciences at UCLA and an author of the annual Hollywood Diversity Report, progress toward racial diversity in the industry has been frustratingly slow, and lagging behind TV.

In their most recent report, issued in early 2019, the authors write that in Hollywood, "people of color remained underrepresented on every industry employment front in 2016-17."

Looking at the decade as a whole, Hunt notes in an interview that while TV has registered some "notable progress" both in front of and, to a lesser extent, behind the camera, there hasn't been much progress in terms of people of color in executive suites, which are still dominated by white men. And in movies, the situation is worse.

"As the country becomes more diverse, the under-representation becomes more severe," he says.

And while his research has found there has been progress over the decade for female directors in the top

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200 films, there's been "zero progress" in the percentage of directors of color for the same years (they're both around 12 percent.) And so, he says, a film like "Black Panther," with a star-packed black cast and a black director (Ryan Coogler), is more of an outlier than an example of real change.

The main issue, Hunt says, is representation at the level where big-money decisions in Hollywood are made. "Looking at dollars, why are they not pursuing a strategy aimed at telling the types of stories that are likely to connect with where the audience is today and where it's clearly headed," he asks, "meaning opening up executive suites to include more women and people of color to tell the stories?"

THE NEXT BIGELOW?

For women in Hollywood, one statistic remains particularly shocking: In the entire history of the Oscars, only one woman has won the best-director Oscar. It happened at the dawn of this decade with Kathryn Bigelow's 2010 trophy for "The Hurt Locker."

There is, though, reason for some measured optimism, on that score and for women as a whole, says USC's Smith. She says that 2019 has emerged as the strongest year for female directors of top 100 films, with 12-14 percent of them featuring a woman behind the camera. That compares to 4 percent pretty much every year from 2007-2018, she says.

The change reflects better hiring practices on the part of studios. "The hiring is what is so important," Smith says. Particularly cheering, she adds, is the slate of superhero movies planned for 2020. The year "is going to be huge," Smith says. "Five superhero movies will be directed by women. Not one, but five."

Across all categories, Smith says, "the decade can be characterized as one of accelerated awareness and some steps toward change." With TV leading the way, storytelling is getting more diverse. There is also some change afoot in the music industry, with a new female president of the Recording Academy, the organization behind the Grammys, named in May.

But, Smith adds, there are some definite negatives. Her most recent report, issued in September and analyzing 1,200 popular films, marked NO progress in the number of female speaking characters. Among female characters, women over 40 were among the least represented, "so we are not seeing women at their height of power and influence in storytelling — the strong political figures, the women in the C-suites, trailblazers in the STEM arena," she says.

And women of color remain marginalized. Of the top 100 films last year, 33 did not feature a single black woman or girl in a speaking role; 54 did not feature an Asian or Asian American, and 70 did not feature a Latina. (The lack of Latino representation in general is particularly troubling, she says.)

"So when Hollywood says 'female,' they're often talking about a Caucasian female," Smith says.

Alligators, pricey bananas and naked people: 2019 in Florida

By TAMARA LUSH Associated Press

ST. PETERSBURG (AP) — In 2019, Florida Banana managed to eclipse Florida Man. From alligator antics to naked people doing wacky things, Florida did not disappoint in the weird news department this year.

(So. Many. Naked. People.)

In December, a Miami couple spent more than \$100,000 on the "unicorn of the art world" — a banana duct-taped to a wall — during Art Basel. The piece was widely copied and mocked on social media, and then someone at the art fair ripped it off the wall and ate it.

Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan sold three editions of "Comedian," each in the \$120,000 to \$150,000 range.

"We are acutely aware of the blatant absurdity of the fact that "Comedian" is an otherwise inexpensive and perishable piece of produce and a couple inches of duct tape," one couple that purchased the banana said. "Ultimately we sense that Cattelan's banana will become an iconic historical object."

Florida is known for many things. Sunshine, beaches and oranges. The magic of Disney and the glamour of South Beach. It's also known for having the most bananas news in the United States.

As they often do, alligators topped the list of odd stories. Perhaps the most visually interesting happened in October, when Paul Bedard, who is contracted with the state's nuisance alligator program, responded to a call of a gator in a swimming pool in Parkland. Bedard "played" with the 8-foot long reptile until it

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became tired. Then he lifted it out of the water and held it over his head for an Instagram photo.

"I haven't had a good-sized gator in a swimming pool in probably a year, so I was kind of looking forward to this when I got the call," he said. The alligator was relocated to a wildlife park.

Humans tangled with gators in a multitude of other ways. One reptile knocked on a woman's door the night before Thanksgiving in Fort Myers. In Martin County, two men poured Coors beer into an alligator's mouth. They were arrested.

Alligators weren't the only animals making headlines in Florida.

In August, a restaurant in Stuart canceled its "Monkey Mondays" when a 9-month-old capuchin named JoJo bit a child's finger.

Also in August, a Lake Worth Beach man began feeding a kinkajou (a raccoon relative with a prehensile tail that's native to Central and South America), but one day, it attacked his leg. "It was not a nice kinkajou. It was super aggressive," the man's girlfriend told The Palm Beach Post.

And a Labrador retriever somehow got behind the wheel of a car and did doughnuts in Port St. Lucie.

Some claim Florida's weird news surfaces because of the state's open public records laws, while others chalk it up to the fact that it's the third largest state, with more than 21 million people packed on a peninsula — many wearing scant clothing because of infernal heat most of the year.

Whatever the reason, taking stock of the year's strange stories in Florida is a time-honored tradition. This year's no different, because the unusual is met with a chuckle and shrug precisely because it's so normal. (Honestly. In 1986, the state's official tourism slogan was "Florida ... The Rules Are Different Here").

Consider Patrick Eldridge of Jacksonville, who parked his tiny Smart Car in his kitchen because he was worried it would blow away during Hurricane Dorian.

The owners of a Port Orange funeral home gave away a free cremation as part of its grand reopening.

A toilet exploded in Port Charlotte when lighting struck the home's septic tank. No one was injured, and homeowner Marylou Ward expressed relief: "I'm just glad none of us were on the toilet."

Folks attacked one another with all manner of items, including (but not limited to): pancake batter, Pop-Tarts, a fake Christmas tree, swords, McDonald's condiment packets and roach spray.

In the city of Port Richey, two mayors were arrested in the span of 20 days — one on charges of obstruction of justice; the other, on allegations he was practicing medicine without a license in his home.

Lest you think all Floridians are strange, a few did some remarkably kind things.

Chicago Bears linebacker Khalil Mack went to his hometown of Fort Pierce and stopped by a Walmart store in December. He paid off all the layaways, to the tune of \$80,000, according to the Chicago Tribune.

A Florida 9-year-old gave his third grade teacher all the feels when he offered his \$15 of birthday money as a solution to the problem of teachers being underpaid.

In Gulf Breeze, a 73-year-old man wanted to "take a little bit of stress out" of the season for his neighbors and secretly gave \$4,600 to help 36 families pay their water and gas bills.

But it's the weird that attracts the most attention here. A number of people were nude, or partially nude, when they made the news.

In Polk County in December, a Florida man was "buck naked" when he showed up to the front door of a home where an undercover sex sting operation was being conducted, sheriff's officials said. A naked Florida man burglarized an elementary school in Apopka and spread feces throughout the building. Cops chased a lot of naked people through parking lots, swamps and stores, too many to list here.

In Miami in March, motorists captured on camera a nearly nude man wearing hot pink socks, sneakers, skimpy underwear and a pink headband, bicycling backwards down I-95.

As one does.

Follow Tamara Lush on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/TamaraLush>

Ukraine, eastern rebels swap prisoners in move to end war

By **EVGENIY MALOLETKA** Associated Press

MAIORSK CHECKPOINT, Ukraine (AP) — Ukrainian forces and Russia-backed rebels in eastern Ukraine on Sunday exchanged 200 prisoners in a move aimed at ending their five-year war.

The swap at a checkpoint near the rebel-held city of Horlivka was part of an agreement brokered this month at a summit of the leaders of Ukraine, Russia, Germany and France.

According to figures from officials of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's republics — the two separatist governments in the rebel area — Ukraine turned over 124 people and the separatists freed 76.

Those released by Ukraine included five former members of the now-disbanded special police force Berkut who were charged in the killing of protesters in Kyiv in 2014, Ukrainian news site Hromadske quoted their lawyer, Igor Varfolomeyev, as saying.

The Security Service of Ukraine said the 76 freed by the rebels included 12 servicemen, two of whom had been held since 2015 after being ambushed while escorting a convoy of wounded out of the battle of Debaltseve, which destroyed much of the city.

U.S.-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty said two of its contributors, Stanislav Aseyev and Oleh Halaziuk, were among the released; they were taken captive in 2017.

Other civilians released by the separatists included a pet shop owner who was detained last year on unknown charges and a woman from government-controlled territory who was seized while visiting her mother in a rebel area.

A representative of the Luhansk rebels, Olga Kovtseva, was quoted by Russian news agencies as saying those released to her side included five Russian citizens and one from Brazil.

The last major prisoner swap between separatist rebels and Ukrainian forces took place in December 2017, with 233 rebels exchanged for 73 Ukrainians.

The conflict in eastern Ukraine has killed more than 14,000 people since 2014. It began about two months after Ukraine's Russia-friendly president fled the country amid massive protests in Kyiv. Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula soon followed.

Hopes for ending the fighting have risen since the election of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy, who has been more amenable to negotiations with Russia on ending the war.

But prospects for peace are troubled by questions over allowing local elections that would ensure the rebel regions more autonomy and about Ukraine regaining control of its border with Russia in the rebel areas.

Russian President Vladimir Putin and German Chancellor Angela Merkel expressed satisfaction about the exchange in a Sunday telephone call, the Kremlin said.

Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron viewed the exchange as "a long hoped-for humanitarian gesture that should contribute to the restoration of trust between the two sides," according to a German government statement.

Konstantin Kosachev, head of the foreign affairs committee in Russia's upper parliament house, took note of the difficult issues still to be solved but said, "One way or another, the countdown is finally moving in the right direction."

The leader of the Luhansk People's Republic, Leonid Pasechnik, praised the exchange as the rebels' "latest victory."

Yuras Karmanau in Minsk, Belarus, David McHugh in Frankfurt, Germany, and Jim Heintz in Moscow contributed.

Calif. vastly expands digital privacy. Will people use it?

By RACHEL LERMAN AP Technology Writer

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Forty million Californians will soon have sweeping digital-privacy rights stronger than any seen before in the U.S., posing a significant challenge to Big Tech and the data economy it helped create.

So long as state residents don't mind shouldering much of the burden of exercising those rights, that is. Come Wednesday, roughly one in 10 Americans will gain the power to review their personal information collected by large companies around the world, from purchase histories and location tracking to compiled "profiles" that slot people into categories such as religion, ethnicity and sexual orientation. Starting January 1, they can also force these companies — including banks, retailers and, of course, tech companies — to stop selling that information or even to delete it in bulk.

The law defines data sales so broadly that it covers almost any information sharing that provides a benefit to business, including data transfers between corporate affiliates and with third party "data brokers" — middlemen who trade in personal information.

It remains unclear how it will affect the business of targeted advertising, in which companies like Facebook amass reams of personal data and use it to direct ads to specific groups of people. Facebook says it doesn't share that personal information with advertisers.

Still, because it applies to any company that meets a threshold for interacting with state residents, the California law might end up serving as a de facto national standard. Early signs of compliance have already started cropping up in the form of "Don't sell my personal information" links at the bottom of many corporate websites.

"If we do this right in California," says California attorney general Xavier Becerra, the state will "put the capital P back into privacy for all Americans."

California's law is the biggest U.S. effort yet to confront "surveillance capitalism," the business of profiting from the data that most Americans give up — often unknowingly — for access to free and often ad-supported services. The law is for anyone ever weirded out when an ad popped up for the product they were just searching on, or who wondered just how much privacy they were giving up by signing into the briefly popular face-changing tool FaceApp.

But there are catches galore. The law — formally known as the California Consumer Privacy Act, or CCPA — seems likely to draw legal challenges, some of which could raise constitutional objections over its broad scope. It's also filled with exceptions that could turn some seemingly broad protections into coarse sieves, and affects only information collected by business, not government.

For instance, if you're alarmed after examining the data that Lyft holds on you, you can ask the company to delete it. Which it will legally have to do — unless it claims some information meets one of the law's many exceptions, among them provisions that allow companies to continue holding information needed to finish a transaction or to keep it in a way you'd "reasonably expect" them to.

"It's more of a 'right to request and hope for deletion,'" says Joseph Jerome, a policy director at privacy group Common Sense Media/Kids Action.

A more fundamental issue, though, is that Californians are largely on their own in figuring out how to make use of their new rights. To make the law effective, they'll need to take the initiative to opt out of data sales, request their own information, and file for damages in the case of data breaches.

"If you aren't even reading privacy agreements that you are signing, are you really going to request your data?" asks Margot Kaminski, an associate professor of law at the University of Colorado who studies law and technology. "Will you understand it or sift through it when you do get it?"

State residents who do make that effort, but find that companies reject their requests or offer only halting and incomplete responses, have no immediate legal recourse. The CCPA defers enforcement action to the state attorney general, who won't be empowered to act until six months after the law takes effect.

When the state does take action, though, it can fine businesses up to \$7,500 for each violation of the law — charges that could quickly add up depending on how many people are affected.

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The law does offer stronger protection for children, for instance by forbidding the sale of data from kids under 16 without consent. "The last thing you want is for any company to think that we're going to soft on letting you misuse kids' personal information," Becerra, the attorney general, said at a press conference in December.

Many of the CCPA's quirks trace back to the roundabout way it became law in the first place. A few years ago, San Francisco real estate developer Alastair Mactaggart asked a friend who worked at a tech company if he should be concerned about news reports on how much companies knew about him. He expected an innocuous answer.

"If you knew how much we knew about you, you'd be terrified," he says the friend told him .

With help, Mactaggart produced a ballot initiative that would let California voters implement new privacy rules. Although initially a long shot, the proposal quickly gained steam amid news of huge data breaches and privacy leaks.

That drew the attention of Silicon Valley, whose big companies considered the ballot initiative too risky. Moving the proposal into the normal legislative process would give them influence, the chance to pass amendments, and above all time to slow down what seemed to be a runaway train.

"I always knew I was signing up for a fight," Mactaggart says .

The developer agreed to pull the initiative off the ballot and have it introduced as a bill. In slightly changed — or weakened, per critics — form, it passed. Gone, for instance, was a provision that would have allowed people to sue when companies improperly declined to hand over or delete data.

The coming year will provide the first evidence of how much protection the CCPA actually offers — and how thoroughly Californians will embrace it.

Among other limitations, the law doesn't really stop companies from collecting personal information or limit how they store it. If you ask a company to delete your data, it can start collecting it again next time you do business with it.

Mary Stone Ross, incoming associate director of the Electronic Privacy Information Center and co-author of the original ballot initiative, worries that CCPA might just unleash a firehose of data on consumers. "A business could actually drown a consumer in information so the important pieces are lost," she says.

There's a way to avoid that by just asking for which categories of information a company holds, such as demographics, preferences or interests. But it's not clear how many will know to do that.

The law's biggest impact, in fact, may lie in how it requires companies to track what data they have, where they keep it, and how to get it to people when requested, says Jen King, director of consumer privacy at Stanford Law School's Center for Internet and Society. That effort alone, which can be substantial, might cause corporations to reconsider how much data they decide to hold onto.

That may lead to some unintended consequences and even corporate attempts to discourage people from using the law. The job-search site Indeed.com, for instance, now explains that when anyone opts out of data sales under CCPA, it will also ask them to delete their associated accounts and all personal information.

Such people will still be able to use the website without logging in. Indeed said in a statement that it routinely transfers personal information such as job-seeker resumes to employers as part of its service. Because it believes that such transfers may qualify as "sales" under CCPA, Indeed will not hold such information for people who opt out of data sales under the law.

AP Writer Don Thompson in Sacramento contributed to this report.

States charge more for electric cars as new laws take effect

By DAVID A. LIEB Associated Press

The new year will bring new charges for some owners of electric vehicles, as an increasing number of states seek to plug in to fresh revenue sources to offset forgone gas taxes.

In Hawaii, the charge will be \$50. In Kansas, \$100. In Alabama and Ohio, \$200.

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New or higher registration fees go into effect Wednesday for electric vehicle owners in at least eight states. For the first time, a majority of U.S. states will impose special fees on gas-free cars, SUVs and trucks — a significant milestone as the trend toward green technology intersects with the mounting need to pay for upgrades and repairs to the nation's infrastructure.

Though electric and plug-in hybrid vehicles comprised less than 2% of new vehicle sales in 2018, their market share is projected to rise substantially in the coming decade. State officials hope the new fees will make up for at least part of the lost gas tax revenue that is essential to their road and bridge programs.

"I think states are still trying to determine what is a fair or equitable fee on these electric vehicle owners," said Kristy Hartman, energy program director at the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Imposing fees on electric vehicles is one of several societal trends reflected in laws taking effect in 2020.

Twenty-one states will raise their minimum wage, including several to \$12 an hour or more. Illinois will become the 11th state to legalize recreational marijuana for adults. And California will join about 10 states that enacted measures this past year relaxing deadlines to sue or prosecute for prior sexual abuse — a reaction to the ongoing sexual abuse scandal in the Roman Catholic Church.

Until now, the federal government and some states have offered incentives to people to buy electric vehicles. But federal tax credits are phasing out for some of the most popular models made by Tesla and General Motors, and some states also are switching course.

Illinois, for example, had offered a two-year license plate for electric vehicles for \$35, a sizable discount over its basic \$98 annual registration fee. Under a law that raised both registration fees and fuel taxes, electric vehicle owners will have to pay the new basic annual rate of \$148, plus an additional \$100 intended to offset the lost fuel taxes.

"It's kind of a blanket penalty for anyone who chooses to go electric," said Neda Deylami, a Tesla owner who founded Chicago for EVs, a group that advocates for electric vehicles.

Three-quarters of the revenue from Alabama's new \$200 fee on electric vehicles and \$100 fee for plug-in hybrids will go to fund state and local roads and bridges. The other quarter will fund grants for electric charging infrastructure, and will expire once electric and plug-in hybrid vehicles surpass 4% of all vehicles in the state.

The fee is designed to bring "more than just a fairness relative to maintenance and construction of infrastructure," said Alabama state Rep. Bill Poole, a Republican, who sponsored the legislation. "I think it went further in terms of planning for the future."

Because average commuting distances vary by vehicle owner, it's difficult to set a universally fair fee for electric vehicles, said Loren McDonald, a California-based industry analyst who runs the website EV Adoption.

"States are actually being very reasonable about this," McDonald said, noting that some are charging less than what vehicle owners might otherwise pay for fuel taxes.

Other states with new or higher electric vehicle fees taking effect in 2020 include Iowa, Oregon and Utah. California, which accounts for nearly half of all electric vehicle sales in the U.S., is to collect a \$100 fee on new "zero-emission" vehicles starting July 1.

Some other notable laws set to take effect Wednesday include:

POLICE USE-OF-FORCE

The nation's oldest law governing when police can use deadly force is being revamped in California to become what the American Civil Liberties Union describes as one of the strongest in the U.S. California's previous law allowed deadly force when officers had "reasonable fear" for their safety. The new law will allow it only when necessary to defend against an imminent threat of death or serious injury to officers or bystanders, but it doesn't include a definition of "necessary."

Another new California law increases officers' training on handling confrontations. The changes come after Sacramento police in 2018 fatally shot Stephon Clark, a 22-year-old black vandalism suspect, leading to major protests.

VACCINATIONS

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A new California law will create greater state oversight of doctors who write medical exemptions for school children's vaccinations. The law generated passionate legislative debate and drew hundreds of supporters and opponents to the Capitol this past year. It will allow the state to investigate doctors who grant more than five medical exemptions in a year and schools with vaccination rates under 95%, the threshold that experts say means a population is resistant to a disease such as measles. The law will phase out existing medical exemptions over the coming years.

GUNS

A Colorado "red flag" law will allow family, household members or law enforcement to petition a court to have guns seized from people deemed a threat to themselves or others. A seizure can be extended to 364 days, and the burden of proof is on the gun owner to get firearms back.

The law was championed by Democratic Rep. Tom Sullivan, whose son, Alex Sullivan, was killed in the 2012 Aurora movie theater shooting. Some Republican lawmakers and the group Rocky Mountain Gun Owners have sued to try to block the law, and about 12 of the state's 64 counties have passed resolutions declaring themselves 2nd Amendment "sanctuaries" in response to it. Some sheriffs have said they won't enforce the court orders.

By contrast, a Tennessee law could allow people to more easily get permits to carry concealed guns. The law creates a less-expensive permit option that doesn't require live-fire training and instead allows people to take an online firearms training or safety course.

IMMIGRATION

Arkansas will become the latest state to wade into the national immigration debate with a new law cutting off discretionary state funding for "sanctuary" cities that don't cooperate with federal immigration authorities. Other Republican-led states have enacted similar laws. By contrast, several Democratic-led states have adopted sanctuary laws restricting local law enforcement officers from asking about people's immigration status or notifying federal authorities when an immigrant is about to be released from state custody.

VOTING

A North Carolina law will alter the process to request and fill out mail-in-absentee ballots in response to a fraud investigation of the 9th U.S. House District race in 2018 that led to a do-over election in 2019. Much of the new law targets a practice called "ballot harvesting," in which political operatives gathered hundreds of absentee ballots from voters and forged signatures or filled in votes. The new law will keep information confidential about people who request absentee ballots until the actual in-person election day.

OPIOIDS

At least seven states will begin requiring electronic prescriptions for controlled substances such as opioids. The movement to do away with handwritten prescriptions by doctors is one of many steps states have been taking to try to curb opioid addictions and overdoses.

New laws taking effect in Arizona, Iowa, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Rhode Island and Tennessee mean a dozen states will now have such laws. Virginia is to implement its law in July, and 13 additional states have passed electronic prescription laws that are to kick in during 2021.

PRIVACY

A California measure described as the nation's most sweeping data privacy law will require many companies to tell consumers, upon request, what personal data they collect about them, why it's collected and what other entities receive it. Consumers can ask companies to delete their personal information and not sell it. The law also prohibits companies from selling data related to children younger than 16 without consent. An economic analysis prepared for the state attorney general's office has estimated the total cost of initial compliance with the law at \$55 billion.

Another new California law will bar police from using facial recognition software in body-worn cameras, a move that follows New Hampshire and Oregon.

An Illinois law seeks to shed light on the use of artificial intelligence during the hiring process. Employers who ask applicants to self-record video interviews and submit them for consideration will have to notify

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applicants and obtain their consent if they intend to use artificial intelligence to analyze the person's facial expressions or fitness for the position.

TAXES

Twenty years after voter approval, Massachusetts will enact the final reduction in a gradual state income tax cut. The 2000 ballot measure was to reduce the state's 5.95% tax rate to 5% by 2003. But lawmakers froze the rate at 5.3% in 2002 and passed a law allowing a more gradual step down to resume if the state hit certain revenue benchmarks. With those conditions satisfied, the tax rate is finally to fall to 5% in 2020.

In Missouri, a corporate income tax law signed in the final hours before former Gov. Eric Greitens resigned in May 2018 will go into effect in 2020. The law will cut Missouri's corporate income tax rate from 6.25% to 4%, making it one of the lowest rates in the nation. But another provision in the law will do away with an option for calculating corporate income that could result in higher Missouri tax bills for some multi-state businesses.

PAID LEAVE

Employees in Washington can start applying for time off under the state's new paid family leave law. Businesses and workers have been paying into the program — approved by the Legislature in 2017 — for the past year through premiums on wages. Starting in 2020, eligible workers can receive 12 weeks paid time off for the birth or adoption of a child or for a serious medical condition of the worker or a family member, or 16 weeks for a combination of both. Washington is the fifth state to launch a paid family leave law, to be followed by Washington, D.C., in July. Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maine and Oregon have passed laws that take effect between 2021 and 2023.

Associated Press writers Don Thompson in Sacramento, California; John O'Connor in Springfield, Illinois; James Anderson in Denver; Jonathan Mattise in Nashville, Tennessee; Andrew DeMillo in Little Rock, Arkansas; Gary Robertson in Raleigh, North Carolina; Steve LeBlanc in Boston; and Rachel La Corte in Olympia, Washington, contributed to this report.

Soul-searching in opera world after tumultuous #MeToo year

By JOCELYN GECKER Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — It was a tumultuous year in the opera world, a year in which sexual harassment allegations against superstar Placido Domingo prompted his disappearance from American stages and sparked deep soul-searching.

Opera performers are applauding new official efforts to create a workplace free of sexual misconduct, but say many in the industry remain fearful of speaking up about predators, particularly those in positions of power.

"The problem is so much bigger than Placido Domingo. It's the whole environment," said American soprano Lauren Flanigan, adding that in her decades-long career "almost every rehearsal I was ever in was sexualized — literally every rehearsal."

Two investigations into Domingo's behavior were opened after Associated Press stories in which more than 20 women said the legendary tenor had pressured them into sexual relationships, behaved inappropriately and sometimes professionally punished those who rebuffed him. Dozens of others told the AP that they had witnessed his behavior.

One of the ongoing investigations is at Los Angeles Opera, where Domingo was general director since 2003. He resigned from the company in October, saying the allegations had "compromised" his ability to continue.

The other is being led by the American Guild of Musical Artists, the union representing many opera house employees, which says it didn't trust the industry to police itself.

Executive director Len Egert emphasized that the union also is looking into the wider problem of misconduct across the industry and the fear of retaliation by people in power.

"I don't think you could find one singer in this business who has not been the victim of harassment,

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bullying or abuse of some kind, and I'm no exception," said bass-baritone Kyle Albertson, who like many others said he prefers not to name names as a matter of survival.

"It's almost written in the job description: You will be abused somehow," Albertson said.

Within the past year, most opera companies have started holding regular sexual harassment workshops, and many distribute and read aloud their sexual harassment policy to incoming casts before the start of rehearsals and distribute contact information for reporting incidents.

"It's now become an option to stand up and say 'These actions are not OK.' And that is fantastic," Albertson said.

The Houston Grand Opera, the Lyric Opera of Chicago, the Minnesota Opera and a few other companies have started hiring special consultants known as intimacy directors to help stage sexually charged scenes to ensure there is no inappropriate improvising.

Perryn Leech, Houston Grand Opera's managing director, said it's about staging sex scenes in "a more caring way."

"There's been a huge change in culture, and we're still a long way from being where we need to be," Leech said, comparing the role of an intimacy director to a fight choreographer who makes sure that performers feel safe, comfortable and don't get hurt, physically or emotionally, on stage.

In opera, displays of passion are an important part of the job and singers often are required to kiss colleagues on stage or act out story lines with rapes, orgies or other acts of sexual violence.

"If you don't overtly remind yourself that this is our job, it can get very confusing very fast," intimacy director Doug Scholz-Carlson said.

Flanigan said her worst experience took place on stage when she was playing the female lead during a 1997 performance of "Macbeth" and an understudy added unscripted sexual violence. "He grabbed me by the hair, pulled my neck backward, so I couldn't get away, then he shoved his face in my face and stuck his tongue in my mouth," she said. Later in the show, she said, "he threw me on the floor and started humping my face — on stage in front of a sold-out theater, while I was supposed to be singing."

In Flanigan's case, "I was known and believed, so he was fired," but she said young artists and many others are far less likely to report abuse.

"Typically if you complain, you don't get hired back," said Flanigan, who now runs a mentoring program for young artists in New York. "The climate has always been 'don't tell and suck it up and deal with it.'"

The industry remains hamstrung by a lack of leadership on the issue by industry stars, she and other singers said.

While celebrities in Hollywood helped end a culture of silence by showing support for producer Harvey Weinstein's accusers, the opera world's reaction has been different. Male stars like Andrea Bocelli have spoken up in Domingo's defense and opera's leading female lights have mostly withheld public comment on both the pervasiveness of the problem and on the high-profile men accused of misconduct, including Domingo and conductors James Levine and Charles Dutoit, all of whom deny any wrongdoing.

"Nobody with greater agency or greater stature is coming forward in a strong way — either to tell their own story or show support," pianist and opera coach Kathleen Kelly said. "Where are the women who are helping to run companies and who are stars? They are not doing a damn thing. And it's incredibly disappointing."

Almost all of the women who came forward about Domingo spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity, citing their fears of the outsize influence that the towering superstar wielded in their industry.

Others spoke of their reluctance to harm an art form they love and seek to protect, especially in the United States where opera companies struggle to reach broader audiences, don't receive government subsidies and must compete for every precious donor dollar.

Many also voiced concerns about losing work, since most opera singers are independent contractors, essentially freelancers, with little job security.

"Singers are told from the beginning: 'If you want to work, don't rock the boat.' And, that the word of maestro is the word of God," opera stage manager Aria Umezawa said.

Since the Domingo allegations publicly surfaced, San Francisco Opera, LA Opera and a few other companies have held "bystander Intervention" training designed by Umezawa, who is trying to bring a see-something, say-something culture to the industry.

For years, Umezawa said, women have quietly talked about feeling unsafe in dressing rooms, at cast parties and rehearsals.

"There is still a lot of fear — and a lot of guilt," she said, both among victims and bystanders. "People are grieving that they stood by and did nothing. They saw what was happening and felt powerless. They didn't realize how terrible it was."

Kelly describes the industry as undergoing growing pains after a year of seismic revelations that forced once-hushed conversations out into the public.

"We're in an uncomfortable place right now," she said. "But to see workplace culture changing so quickly is really hopeful."

Slippery salvation: Could seaweed as cow feed help climate?

By **PATRICK WHITTLE** Associated Press

FREEMPORT, Maine (AP) — Coastal Maine has a lot of seaweed, and a fair number of cows. A group of scientists and farmers think that pairing the two could help unlock a way to cope with a warming world.

The researchers — from a marine science lab, an agriculture center and universities in northern New England — are working on a plan to feed seaweed to cows to gauge whether that can help reduce the greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to climate change.

About a quarter of the methane in the country comes from cattle, which produce the gas when they belch or flatulate.

The concept of feeding seaweed to cows has gained traction in recent years because of some studies that have shown its potential to cut back on methane. The reduction might be because the seaweed interrupts the process of production of the gas in the animals' guts.

One of the big questions is which kinds of seaweed offer the highest benefit to farmers looking to cut methane, and the researchers hope to find out, said Nichole Price, a senior research scientist at Bigelow Laboratory for Ocean Sciences in East Boothbay, Maine, and the project's leader.

"What on that list has the ability to do two things — not just reduce methane emissions, but have some health benefits for the cow that have a cost savings or cost efficiency for the farmer?" Price said.

The researchers plan to conduct feeding trials with cows in Maine and New Hampshire in 2020 and 2021 to see whether seaweeds that can be used as cattle feed can cut the methane. They also intend to screen seaweeds for compounds that make them useful as cattle feed additives.

The lab work to determine whether the seaweeds succeed in reducing methane will take place at University of Vermont.

The research team has received a \$3 million grant from the Shelby Cullom Davis Charitable Fund toward the work.

Studies involving some seaweeds have yielded results in cutting methane. Researchers from the University of California, Davis, found last year that methane emissions were reduced by 24% to 58% in a dozen cows that ate one variety of the *Asparagopsis* genus of seaweed.

There's no guarantee other kinds of seaweed would have the same effect, said Ermias Kebreab, a professor of animal science at UC Davis who is not involved in the New England work. However, new kinds of seaweed feeds could still help improve cattle's diet on farms, he said.

"I think there is indeed good potential to use seaweed as cattle feed if it can replace high protein/energy sources such as corn, alfalfa and other ingredients commonly used in the industry," Kebreab said in an email.

One potential problem could lie in producing enough seaweed to feed to cows. But Dorn Cox, research director of Wolfe's Neck Center for Agriculture and the Environment in Freeport, Maine, said the growth of seaweed as cattle feed could potentially benefit dairy farmers, as well as aquaculturists. Wolfe's Neck will host some of the feeding trials.

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Maine has a growing seaweed farming industry, and evidence that seaweed is good for cows' health would aid that growth, Cox said.

"That's why the research is so important," Cox said. "We have to make sure it's going to work and it's something we can grow regeneratively as part of the Maine coastal ecosystem."

Today in History By The Associated Press

Today in History

Today is Monday, Dec. 30, the 364th day of 2019. There is one day left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 30, 1922, Vladimir Lenin proclaimed the establishment of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, which lasted nearly seven decades before dissolving in December 1991.

On this date:

In 1813, British troops burned Buffalo, New York, during the War of 1812.

In 1853, the United States and Mexico signed a treaty under which the U.S. agreed to buy some 45,000 square miles of land from Mexico for \$10 million in a deal known as the Gadsden Purchase.

In 1860, 10 days after South Carolina seceded from the Union, the state militia seized the United States Arsenal in Charleston.

In 1903, about 600 people died when fire broke out at the recently opened Iroquois Theater in Chicago.

In 1936, the United Auto Workers union staged its first "sit-down" strike at the General Motors Fisher Body Plant No. 1 in Flint, Michigan. (The strike lasted until Feb. 11, 1937.)

In 1940, California's first freeway, the Arroyo Seco Parkway connecting Los Angeles and Pasadena, was officially opened by Gov. Culbert L. Olson.

In 1942, a near-riot of bobby-soxers greeted the opening of Frank Sinatra's singing engagement at the Paramount Theater in New York's Times Square.

In 1972, the United States halted its heavy bombing of North Vietnam.

In 1979, Broadway composer Richard Rodgers died in New York at age 77.

In 1989, a Northwest Airlines DC-10, which had been the target of a telephoned threat, flew safely from Paris to Detroit with 22 passengers amid extra-tight security.

In 1997, a deadly massacre in Algeria's insurgency began in four mountain villages as armed men killed women and children in an attack that lasted from dusk until dawn the following morning; up to 412 deaths were reported.

In 2006, a state funeral service was held in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda for former President Gerald R. Ford.

Ten years ago: Seven CIA employees and a Jordanian intelligence officer were killed by a suicide bomber at a U.S. base in Khost (hohst), Afghanistan. British contractor Peter Moore was freed more than two years after he was abducted outside Iraq's Finance Ministry. Former Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid (ahb-doo-RAHK'-mahn wah-HEED'), 69, who had ruled after the fall of dictator Suharto, died in Jakarta.

Five years ago: President Vladimir Putin's chief political foe, Alexei Navalny, was convicted along with his brother, Oleg, in a fraud case widely seen as a vendetta by the Kremlin, triggering one of Russia's boldest anti-government demonstrations in years. Luise Rainer, a star of cinema's golden era who won back-to-back Oscars but then walked away from a glittering Hollywood career, died in London at age 104.

One year ago: President Donald Trump's outgoing chief of staff, John Kelly, told the Los Angeles Times that Trump had long ago backed away from his campaign pledge to construct a solid wall along the U.S.-Mexico border. A lion killed an intern, 22-year-old Alexandra Black, at a zoo in North Carolina after the animal got loose from a locked space; deputies said the lion was then shot and killed after attempts to tranquilize it failed. The former top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, retired Gen. Stanley McChrystal, criticized the reported plans to withdraw up to half of the 14,000 American troops still serving there, saying it would reduce the incentive for the Taliban to negotiate a peace deal.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Russ Tamblyn is 85. Baseball Hall of Famer Sandy Koufax is 84. Folk singer

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Noel Paul Stookey is 82. TV director James Burrows is 79. Actor Fred Ward is 77. Singer-musician Michael Nesmith is 77. Actress Concetta Tomei (toh-MAY') is 74. Singer Patti Smith is 73. Rock singer-musician Jeff Lynne is 72. TV personality Meredith Vieira is 66. Actress Sheryl Lee Ralph is 64. Actress Patricia Kalember is 63. Country singer Suzy Bogguss is 63. Former "Today" show co-host Matt Lauer is 62. Actress-comedian Tracey Ullman is 60. Rock musician Rob Hotchkiss is 59. Radio-TV commentator Sean Hannity is 58. Sprinter Ben Johnson is 58. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo is 56. Actor George Newbern is 56. Movie director Bennett Miller is 53. Singer Jay Kay (Jamiroquai) is 50. Rock musician Byron McMackin (Pennywise) is 50. Actress Meredith Monroe is 50. Actor Daniel Sunjata is 48. Actress Maureen Flannigan is 47. Actor Jason Behr is 46. Golfer Tiger Woods is 44. TV personality-boxer Laila Ali is 42. Actress Lucy Punch is 42. Singer-actor Tyrese Gibson is 41. Actress Eliza Dushku is 39. Rock musician Tim Lopez (Plain White T's) is 39. Actress Kristin Kreuk is 37. Folk-rock singer-musician Wesley Schultz (The Lumineers) is 37. NBA player LeBron James is 35. Rhythm-and-blues singer Andra Day is 35. Actress Anna Wood is 34. Pop-rock singer Ellie Goulding (GOL'-ding) is 33. Actress Caity Lotz is 33. Actor Jeff Ward is 33. Country musician Eric Steedly is 29. Pop-rock musician Jamie Follese (FAHL'-es-ay) (Hot Chelle (shel) Rae) is 28.

Thought for Today: "The meek shall inherit the earth — if that's all right with you." — Author unknown.
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