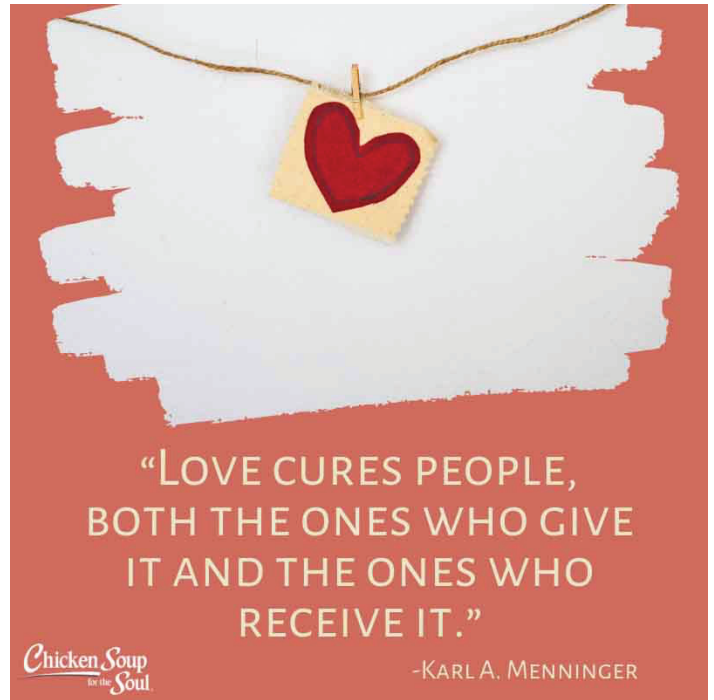




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It's Basketball Action on GDILIVE.COM

 **Warner Monarchs** VS 

**Groton Area Tigers**

4:00 p.m. **Girls JV** - sponsored by Larry & Kathy Harry

5:15 p.m.: **Boys JV** - sponsored by Julie Larson

6:30 p.m.: **Girls Varsity Game** sponsored by  
Locke Electric and the S.D. Army National Guard

8:00 p.m.: **Boys Varsity Game**  
sponsored by Aberdeen Chrysler Center

## **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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Groton City Council Meeting Agenda  
February 18, 2020 – 7:00pm  
Groton Community Center

1. Public Comments - pursuant to SDCL 1-25-1  
(Public Comments will offer the opportunity for anyone not listed on the agenda to speak to the council. Speaking time will be limited to 3 minutes. No action will be taken on questions or items not on the agenda.)
2. Minutes
3. Bills
4. January Finance Report
5. Ken's First Addition to the City of Groton Resolution
6. First Reading of the Summer Salary Ordinance #733
7. Sign 2018/2019 Audit Engagement letter with Eide Bailly
8. Petitions must be submitted by February 28<sup>th</sup> at 5:00pm
9. Paint – South Dakota 2020
10. Executive session personnel & legal 1-25-2 (1) & (3)
11. Adjournment

## 2020 Flood Outlook Released

Due to the very wet conditions across the area late last summer and into last fall, the chances for minor, moderate, or major flooding are above normal across the eastern and central parts of the area, with lesser chances across the west.

The flood threat through this spring, both in location and severity, will be determined by future rain or snowfall, and how fast the melting of the snowpack occurs.

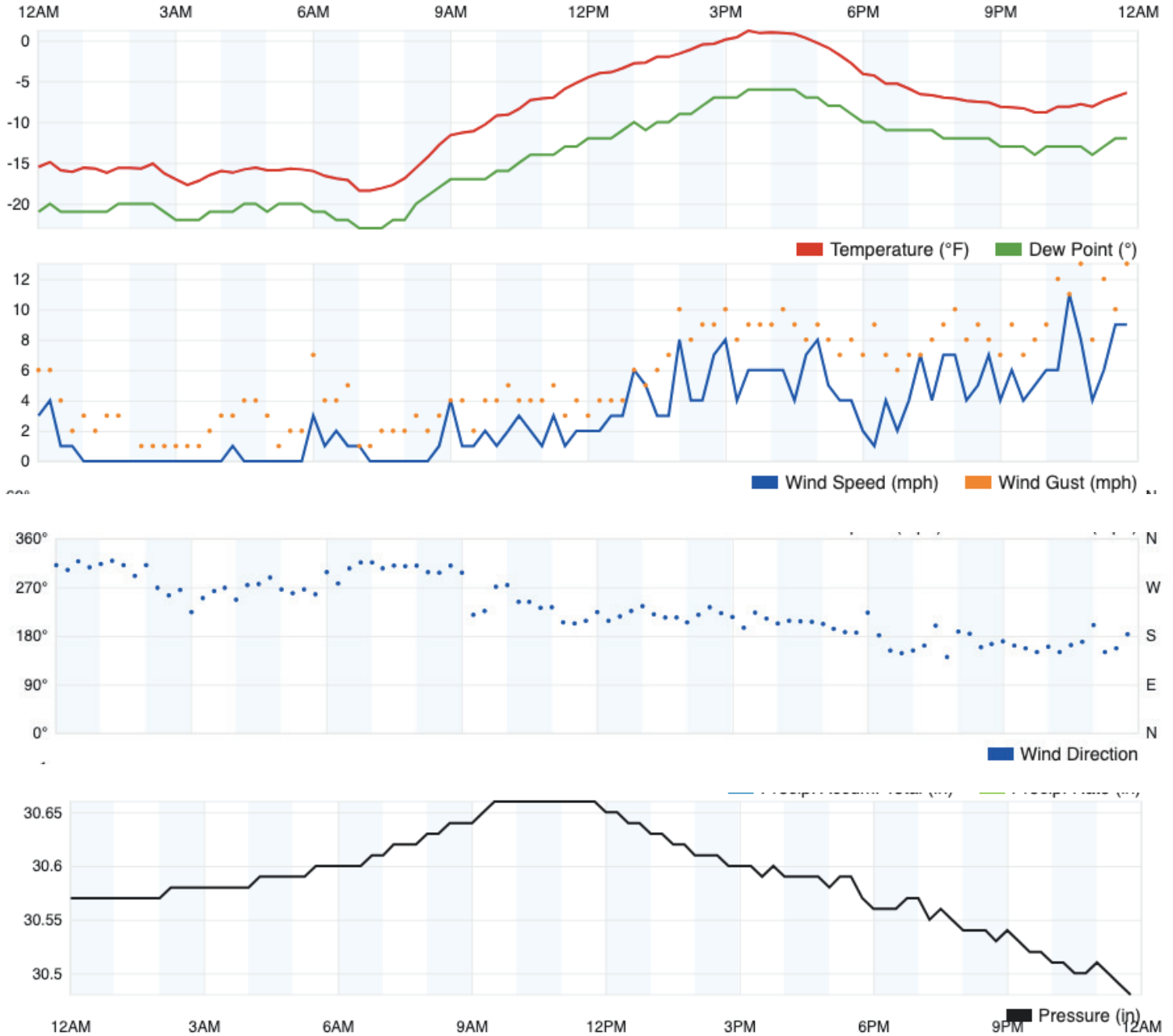
The outlook for the next two weeks is for higher chances for below normal precipitation, and higher chances for above normal temperatures. The 90 day outlook through the end of April shows higher chances for above normal precipitation and temperatures.

The chances for river flooding are near to above normal, with well above normal chances for the James River and Big Sioux River basins.

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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## Our flowers have arrived and we have lots of Valentine's Day balloons.



We have 4 of the Sweet Thing bouquets (left photo) left. They are \$18. We can add 3 colored roses for \$12 extra. We have single roses for \$6, 3 rose bouquets for \$15, half a dozen for \$28 and a dozen for \$45. Add a balloon for \$4. Stop on in or call/text Paul at (605) 397-7460. 21 N Main, downtown Groton.



## Upcoming Events

### Friday, February 14, 2020

Rushmore Challenge Debate at Harrisburg High School

NO SCHOOL - Faculty Inservice

Basketball Double Header at Warner. Girls JV at 4 p.m., Boys JV at 5:15 p.m., Girls Varsity at 6:30 p.m. followed by the Boys Varsity Game.

### Saturday, February 15, 2020

Rushmore Challenge Debate at Harrisburg High School

10:00 a.m.: Junior High State Wrestling Tournament at Pierre High School

Basketball Doubleheader with Mobridge-Pollock coming to Groton Area. Girls JV at 2 p.m., Boys JV at 3 p.m., Girls Varsity at 4:30 p.m. followed by the Boys Varsity Game.

### Sunday, February 16, 2020

2:00pm- 6:00pm: Open Gym at GHS Arena

2:00-4:00 PM Grades JK-8 (Students must be accompanied by an adult) 4:00-6:00 PM Grades 6-12

### Monday, February 17, 2020

President's Day - NO SCHOOL

Boys Basketball hosts Aberdeen Roncalli. C game at 5 p.m. followed by JV then Varsity.

### Tuesday, February 18, 2020

Girls Varsity at Webster Area. JV game at 6:30 p.m. followed by Varsity Game.

7 pm.: City Council Meeting at Groton Community Center

### Wednesday, February 19, 2020

Life Touch Pictures at MS/HS

### Thursday, February 20, 2020

Girls Basketball hosts Milbank. C game at 5 p.m. followed by JV then Varsity

### Friday, February 21, 2020

Boys Basketball at Milbank. C game at 5 p.m., followed by JV then Varsity.

6:30pm: Elementary PAC Science Night at Groton Area Elementary School

### Saturday, February 22, 2020

Basketball: Boys 7th/8th Jamboree at Britton-Hecla High School






10:00am: Wrestling: Varsity Regions at Sisseton

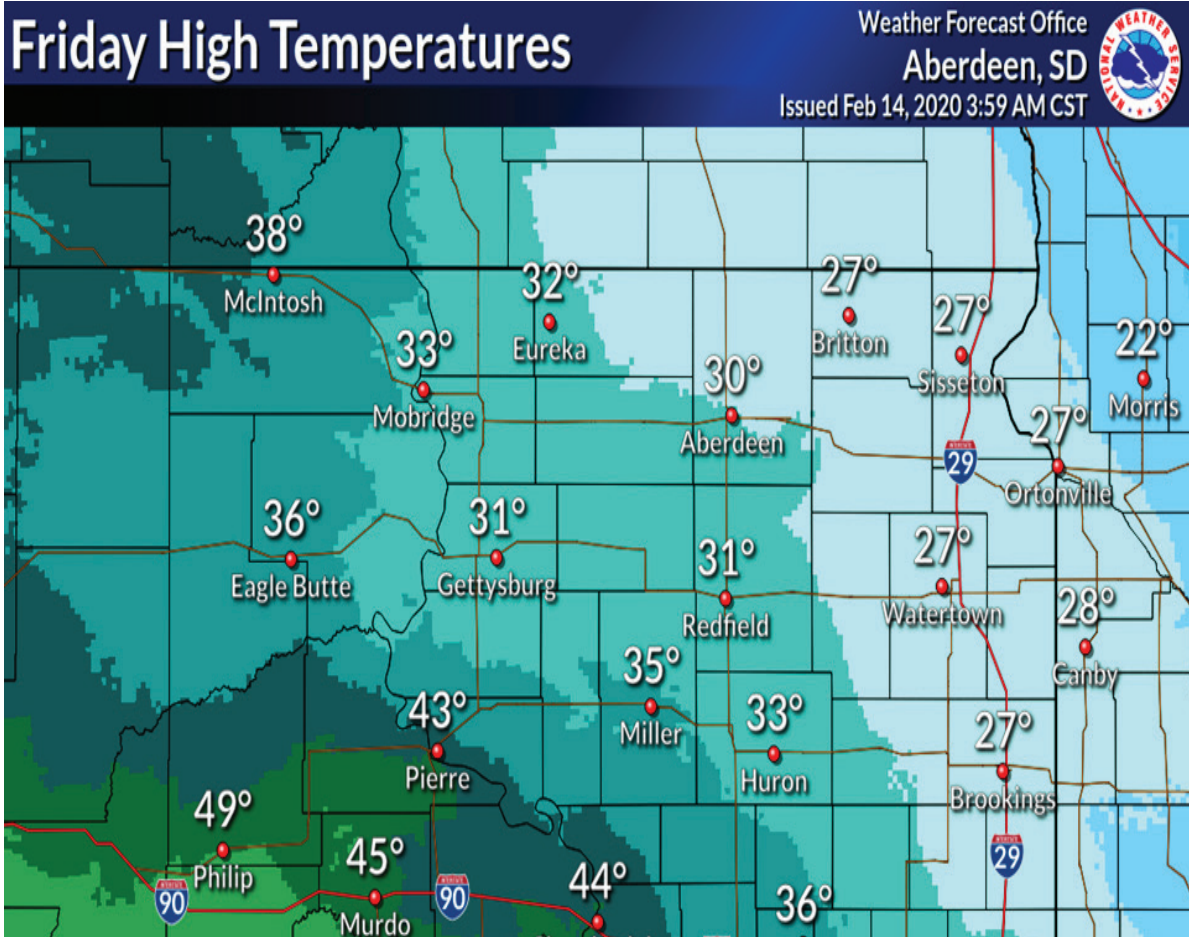
### Monday, February 24, 2020

Life Touch pictures at elementary school

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Today	Tonight	Saturday	Saturday Night	Sunday
				
Patchy Blowing Snow and Breezy	Partly Cloudy	Mostly Sunny	Mostly Cloudy	Mostly Cloudy
High: 29 °F	Low: 20 °F	High: 33 °F	Low: 8 °F	High: 23 °F



Highs today after the cold start. It will be breezy to windy east river as well.

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## Today in Weather History

February 14, 1967: The heaviest snow fell in the central part of the state with Pierre receiving 10 inches with 14 inches reported near Harrold. Elsewhere, 1 to 4 inches of snow was common. Winds of 20 to 30 mph with gusts over 40 mph caused extensive drifting and blowing snow reducing visibilities to near zero at times. Many schools were closed and other activities canceled. Temperatures of 5 to 15 degrees below zero were common the morning of the 15th. A farmer died in the storm near Yale where his car stalled, and he attempted to walk.

February 14, 1979: High winds of 50 mph or greater and snow from a half inch to more than 14 inches moved through the state late on the 14th with winds slowly subsiding on the 16th. Visibility was reduced to near zero at the height of the storm, and no travel was advised. Temperatures fell to 25 degrees below zero with wind chills to 80 to 90 below on the 15th. One man suffered frostbite after being stranded in his truck for seventeen hours. Power was lost at Wall due to high winds snapping power lines together.

1895: The greatest snowfall in the history of Houston, Texas occurred on the 14th and 15th. The Houston area saw 20 inches of snow.

1990: Valentine's Day was a snowy one for many parts of Iowa and Illinois. Five to ten inches of snow fell across Iowa. Six to 12 inches of snow blanketed northern Illinois, and strong northeasterly winds accompanied the heavy snow. Air traffic came to a halt during the evening at O'Hare Airport in Chicago, where 9.7 inches of snow was reported. More than 250 traffic accidents were reported around Des Moines, Iowa during the evening rush hour. An ice storm glazed east central sections of Illinois, causing twelve million dollars damage in Champaign County alone.

2010: Vancouver continues to struggle with above average, non-winter-like temperatures during the first weekend of the 2010 Winter Olympics. In fact earlier this morning, Vancouver was warmer, 48 degrees, than Miami, Florida 45 degrees!

1899 - A great blizzard struck the eastern U.S. Washington D.C. received 20.5 inches of snow to bring their total snow depth to nearly three feet. The storm produced 36 inches of snow at Cape May NJ. (David Ludlum)

1940 - A "Saint Valentine's Day Blizzard" hit the northeastern U.S. Up to a foot and a half of snow blanketed southern New England, and whole gales accompanied the heavy snow stranding many in downtown Boston. (David Ludlum)

1987 - A powerful storm spawned severe thunderstorms in Texas and Oklahoma, and produced heavy snow in the Rocky Mountain Region. Snowfall totals in Colorado ranged up to 27 inches at Telluride. Straight line winds gusting to 104 mph howled through Guadalupe Pass in West Texas. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Strong northerly winds ushered arctic air into the north central U.S. Snow and high winds created blizzard conditions in Minnesota and the Dakotas. Winds gusted to 56 mph at Rapid City SD, and reached 65 mph at Cody WY. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - While "Valentine's Day" was a soggy one in the Ohio Valley and the Tennessee Valley, unseasonably warm weather prevailed in the southeastern U.S. Seventeen cities reported record high temperatures for the date as readings warmed into the 70s and 80s. (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - Valentine's Day was a snowy one for many parts of the western and central U.S. Five to ten inches of snow fell across Iowa, and 6 to 12 inches of snow blanketed northern Illinois, and strong northeasterly winds accompanied the heavy snow. Air traffic came to a halt during the evening at O'Hare Airport in Chicago, where 9.7 inches of snow was reported. More than 250 traffic accidents were reported around Des Moines IA during the evening rush hour. An icestorm glazed east central sections of Illinois, causing twelve million dollars damage in Champaign County alone. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2004 - Dallas receives 3 inches of snow, wreaking havoc with Valentine's Day flower deliveries. The greatest snowfall since 1978 caused numerous traffic accidents, power outages and flight cancellations at Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport.

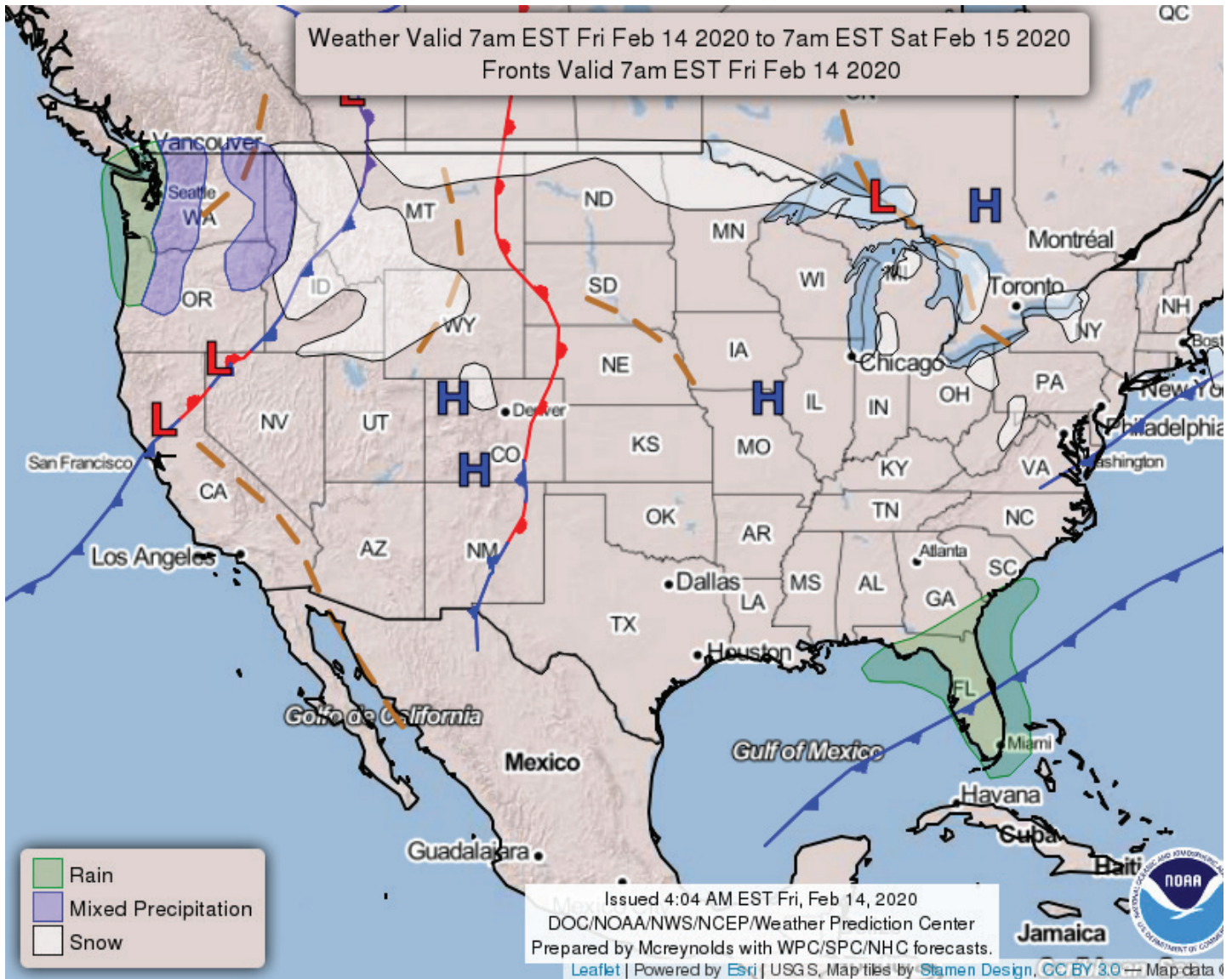
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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

**High Temp: 1 °F at 3:28 PM**  
**Low Temp: -18 °F at 7:01 AM**  
**Wind: 14 mph at 11:58 PM**  
**Snow**

**Record High: 57° in 1934**  
**Record Low: -30° in 1936, 1906**  
**Average High: 28°F**  
**Average Low: 7°F**  
**Average Precip in Feb.: 0.21**  
**Precip to date in Feb.: 0.00**  
**Average Precip to date: 0.68**  
**Precip Year to Date: 0.35**  
**Sunset Tonight: 5:59 p.m.**  
**Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:36 a.m.**



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## MOP, PLEASE

A fierce storm was raging. It was dark and cold, and Jim's mother was busy cleaning the kitchen. Nearing the end of her work, she said, "Please go outside and get me the mop, would you?"

"But Mom," he pleaded, "I'm afraid of the dark."

"Don't be afraid, son," she said. "Jesus is there to help you."

He opened the door, peered into the darkness, stuck one hand outside and said, "Jesus, would you please hand me the mop?" Is that really one of Jesus' responsibilities?

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul said, "I can do everything with the help of Christ." Most of us wonder what he meant by "everything." So, it's fair to ask: what did he mean?

As we live in Christ, with Christ, through Christ, and for Christ, we can do "everything" with the help of Christ as long as we are doing His will: following His teachings and being obedient to His commands. His power is always available and His strength is certainly sufficient to meet, face and overcome any challenge that may confront us. But we must abide in His Word, be obedient to His teachings, and follow the directions He gives us in His Word.

Prayer: Father, we know that we can do everything You have called us to do with Your help. Be with us, empower us, and enable us to be faithful and obedient to You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Philippians 4:1 I can do all this through him who gives me strength.



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## 2020 Groton SD Community Events

- 03/14/2020 Youth Girls/Boys Basketball Tourney Grades 4th-6th (Baseball/Softball Foundation Fundraiser)
  - 04/04/2020 Groton Lions Club Easter Egg Hunt - City Park (Saturday a week before Easter Weekend)
  - 04/04/2020 Dueling Piano's Baseball Fundraiser at the American Legion
  - 04/25/2020 Fireman's Stag (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
  - 04/25-26/2020 Front Porch 605 Rural Route Road Trip
  - 04/26/2020 Father/Daughter dance.
  - 05/02/2020 Spring City-Wide Rummage Sales, (1st Saturday in May)
  - 05/25/2020 Groton American Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services
  - 06/05/2020 Athletic Fundraiser at Olive Grove Golf Course
  - 06/8-10/2020 St. John's VBS
  - 06/19/2020 SDSU Golf at Olive Grove Golf Course
  - 06/22/2020 Olive Grove Golf Course Ladies Invitational
  - 07/04/2020 Firecracker Golf Tourney (4th of July)
  - 07/12/2020 Summer Fest/Car Show
  - 07/16/2020 Olive Grove Golf Course Pro Am Golf Tourney
  - 07/31-08/04/2020 State American Legion Baseball Tournament in Groton
  - 09/12/2020 Fall City-Wide Rummage Sales (1st Sat. after Labor Day)
  - 09/13/2020 Olive Grove Golf Course Couples Sunflower Classic
  - 10/09/2020 Lake Region Marching Band Festival (2nd Friday in October)
  - 10/10/2020 Pumpkin Fest (Saturday before Columbus Day)
  - 10/31/2020 Downtown Trick or Treat
  - 10/31/2020 Groton United Methodist Trunk or Treat
  - 11/14/2020 Groton Legion Annual Turkey Party (Saturday closest to Veteran's Day)
  - 11/26/2020 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center
  - 12/05/2020 Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services
  - 01/--/2021 83rd Annual Carnival of Silver Skates
- 
- Bingo every Wednesday 6:30pm at the American Legion Post #39
  - Groton Lions Club Wheel of Meat, American Legion Post #39 7pm (Saturday nights November 30th thru April 11th)
  - Groton Lions Club Wheel of Pizza, Jungle Lanes 8pm (Saturday nights November 30th thru April 11th)
- 
- All dates are subject to change, check for updates here

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## News from the Associated Press

### Woman wanted for felony child neglect arrested in Rosebud

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — A Bismarck woman wanted after failing to appear in court on felony child neglect charges has been arrested in South Dakota.

Dawn Morsette, 27, was arrested last June after her 7-month-old daughter went missing. The child was dropped off anonymously at Sanford Hospital after a search by family and law enforcement.

Morsette was released from custody after posting a \$2,500 bond. A state warrant was issued after she failed to show up for a court hearing.

The Bismarck Tribune reports that last month a federal warrant was issued for unlawful flight to avoid prosecution after electronic surveillance by federal agents showed Morsette was at a residence on the Rosebud Indian Reservation.

She was arrested in Rosebud Feb. 6.

### Thursday's Scores By The Associated Press

#### BOYS BASKETBALL=

Aberdeen Central 75, Brookings 46  
Aberdeen Christian 66, North Central Co-Op 21  
Alliance, Neb. 78, Rapid City Christian 38  
Arlington 69, Dell Rapids St. Mary 59  
Brandon Valley 58, Huron 55  
Burke 69, Kimball/White Lake 58  
Centerville 68, Menno 43  
Clark/Willow Lake 52, Aberdeen Roncalli 41  
Corsica/Stickney 79, Freeman 31  
DeSmet 56, Wolsey-Wessington 45  
Ethan 75, Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 65  
Flasher, N.D. 61, Lemmon 49  
Freeman Academy/Marion 66, Andes Central/Dakota Christian 55  
Hanson 64, Mitchell Christian 39  
Harding County 93, Tiospaye Topa 68  
Hulett, Wyo. 79, Edgemont 48  
Ipswich 61, Sunshine Bible Academy 44  
Iroquois 64, Hitchcock-Tulare 57  
Jones County 65, Dupree 31  
Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 53, Estelline/Hendricks 37  
Omaha Nation, Neb. 80, Marty Indian 68  
Potter County 73, Faulkton 35  
Sioux Falls Christian 78, Western Christian, Iowa 70  
Sioux Falls Roosevelt 68, Mitchell 61  
Waverly-South Shore 66, Waubay/Summit 47  
Wessington Springs 53, Miller 45  
Winner 66, Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 63

#### GIRLS BASKETBALL=

Aberdeen Roncalli 60, Clark/Willow Lake 21  
Andes Central/Dakota Christian 49, Freeman Academy/Marion 24

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Brandon Valley 58, Huron 55  
Cody-Kilgore, Neb. 68, Bennett County 64  
Deuel 69, Tiospa Zina Tribal 52  
Douglas 48, Sturgis Brown 47, OT  
Ethan 39, Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 30  
Hamlin 45, Redfield 37  
Harding County 65, Tiospaye Topa 32  
Hitchcock-Tulare 64, Iroquois 34  
Lead-Deadwood 58, Philip 53  
Lyman 73, Sunshine Bible Academy 19  
Marty Indian 51, Omaha Nation, Neb. 48  
McCook Central/Montrose 61, Tea Area 58  
Milbank 53, Britton-Hecla 30  
Miller 49, Wessington Springs 25  
North Central Co-Op 42, Aberdeen Christian 40  
O Gorman 68, Sioux City, East, Iowa 45  
Parkston 53, Freeman 24  
Pine Ridge 67, Little Wound 61  
Ponca, Neb. 46, Elk Point-Jefferson 37  
Scotland 65, Bridgewater-Emery 49  
Spearfish 51, Custer 41  
St. Thomas More 61, Red Cloud 42  
Todd County 81, Kadoka Area 67  
Winner 71, Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 39  
Yankton 48, Watertown 39

Some high school basketball scores provided by Scorestream.com, <https://scorestream.com/>

## No. 21 South Dakota women roll to 12th straight win, 88-51

VERMILLION, S.D. (AP) — Hannah Sjerven scored 18 points with 11 rebounds and No. 21 South Dakota beat Western Illinois 88-51 on Thursday night for the Coyotes' 12th consecutive victory.

Taylor Frederick added 13 points and Chloe Lamb and Ciara Duffy 11 each with Duffy adding seven assists. Madison McKeever was the fifth Coyote in double figures with 10. Duffy has scored in double figures in 24 of 25 games this season.

The Coyotes (23-2, 12-0 Summit League), outrebounded the Leathernecks (13-12, 7-5) by 20 in beating the Leathernecks for the sixth straight time.

The Coyotes led by nine at halftime and outscored the Leathernecks by 14 in the third quarter, starting the period on a 14-3 run with eight points from Sjerven. A 9-0 run to start the fourth put the Coyotes ahead by 32.

Elizabeth Lutz made five 3-pointers and scored 18 points with five steals for Western Illinois.

## Brrrr! Arctic front brings dangerous wind chills to Midwest

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Students stayed home from school Thursday and several businesses were closed in parts of the upper Midwest as arctic air pushed wind chill readings to dangerously low temperatures.

A wind chill warning was in effect for northeastern North Dakota and northern Minnesota, with wind chill readings plunging to more than 40 below zero (-40 Celsius) in some areas. Forecasters from the National Weather Service urged people to limit time outdoors and bundle up, as exposed skin could be subject to frostbite in as little as 10 minutes.

It's possible that at least one death could be attributed to the cold. Police in Omaha said they found the body of Robert Freymuller, 80, early Thursday in a street not far from the assisted-living center where he lived. His death is being investigated, but police said he was not dressed appropriately for the weather; the wind chill had dropped to minus 26 degrees (minus 32 Celsius) at that time.

In Minnesota, the coldest wind chill reading was in Fosston, in northwestern Minnesota, where the wind chill reached 48 degrees below (-44 Celsius), the National Weather Service said.

Minnesota's Anoka-Hennepin School District notified parents that classes were canceled "due to extreme winter weather conditions in the early morning hours." Several other districts were closed, and some had e-learning days, meaning that students received instruction online.

Schools, businesses and organizations were also closed or were opening late in Nebraska and Iowa on Thursday, as temperatures dropped to about 10-20 degrees below average in the northern and central Plains. Montana, South Dakota, Wisconsin and northern Missouri were also under wind chill advisories.

The upper Midwest will see some relief from the bitter cold over the weekend, as the cold air is expected to push into the Ohio Valley and interior New England and the lower Great Lakes region by Friday.

## Black college swimmer sues Illinois police over false arrest

EAST MOLINE, Ill. (AP) — Illinois police officers wrongfully arrested, detained and threatened to shoot a black college athlete while pointing a gun to his forehead at a rest stop as he traveled with the school's swim team, a civil rights group contends in a lawsuit.

Jaylan Butler, who was then a 19-year-old member of the Eastern Illinois University swim team, is suing six officers for false arrest, excessive detention and use of force, according to a federal lawsuit the American Civil Liberties Union of Illinois filed last month in a district court. The case is still pending.

"My dad taught me at a young age what to do when you are stopped by police officers — stop instantly, put your hands up, drop anything you are holding, and drop to your knees," Butler, 20, told The Dispatch-Rock Island Argus. "I hoped I would never have to use this advice in my life, but all that changed in seconds."

On February 24, 2019, Butler and his teammates were traveling on a bus from a South Dakota swim meet when they stopped at an East Moline rest stop, just over the Illinois border past the Interstate 80 bridge. Butler stepped out to stretch his legs. Heading back onto the bus, his coach suggested he take a photo of a roadside sign for the team's social media account.

While taking the photo, several law enforcement vehicles stopped and officers drew their guns. Two officers had Butler on the ground. Butler said one cop pointed a rifle at him and another had a gun to his head.

"He said, 'If you move, I'll blow your (expletive) head off,'" Butler said.

The team's bus driver, Todd Slingerland, and Butler's coach were alarmed and exited the bus to tell the officers the teen was part of the school's swim team.

Several minutes after the officers searched his pockets and placed him, still cuffed, in the back of a police vehicle, ACLU lawyers said authorities forced him to provide photo identification before releasing him. The officers involved were part of the Hampton Police Department, the East Moline Police Department, and the Rock Island County Sheriff's Office, ACLU attorneys noted.

Rock Island County State's Attorney Dora Villarreal, whose office will defend the two unnamed county deputies named in the suit, said it is her understanding the two were not with the sheriff's department. The officers were called in to assist on a Henry County incident, Villarreal added.

Henry County Sheriff Kerry Loncka said Illinois State Police asked for help in chasing a man in a vehicle who shot at a truck on Interstate 80. When the newspaper contacted the state police to seek information, state police declined to comment.

The ACLU says Butler started seeing a therapist to address trauma and depression he's endured following the incident.

"I was scared and depressed. I remember sitting in class the next day, looking at the bruises on my wrists and replaying the events of that night," said Jaylan. "Now whenever I see a police officer, I don't

feel safe—I feel scared and anxious.”

## **Governor wants agreements with tribes to tackle crime, meth**

**By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press**

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — Gov. Kristi Noem is asking the nine Native American tribes in South Dakota to enter into law enforcement agreements with the state to better tackle crime and meth on reservations.

The Republican governor on Thursday commended tribes for addressing problems with meth addiction and said the state wants to help tribes that don't have sufficient tribal police officers to counteract crime and drug addiction. But tribal leaders said the governor would have to overcome a history of trauma and strains in their relationship over the governor's revival of "riot boosting" laws this year.

"This will be a new kind of partnership that I would like to see every single tribe engage in," Noem told reporters on Thursday.

The agreements would respect tribal sovereignty while promoting cooperation between state law enforcement and tribal police officers, Noem said. State police may be allowed to act on tribal lands as part of the agreements, but would follow tribal laws. The agreements would be flexible, only applying for a certain length of time or particular type of law enforcement, she said.

The state already has an agreement with the Crow Creek Sioux Tribe that allows Highway Patrol officers to conduct traffic enforcement on highways running through tribal land. State police officers also help with security during the tribe's annual powwow, but can only enforce tribal laws.

Lester Thompson, the chairman of the Crow Creek Sioux Tribe, said the tribe entered into the agreement after overweight semitrailers started tearing up tribal highways. He also had concerns about people being trafficked through tribal land.

Thompson said the agreement has worked so far, but he would be cautious about expanding it to allow state law enforcement onto more tribal land.

"You have a people who have had a historically traumatic experience with state law enforcement and it's hard to erase that history," said Thompson. "You have to build that trust again."

Thompson said Noem's push this year to revive "riot boosting" laws ahead of the planned construction of the Keystone XL pipeline strains the state's relationship with the tribes. The laws target people who urge or incite violence, but Native American groups have said it would also silence protesters. Five tribes have voiced opposition to the proposal.

Noem said while they may disagree on that issue, "that doesn't mean that on every other issue that we can't continue to work together."

The governor met with representatives from some of the tribes before the session began to discuss pending legislation and issues facing the tribes. At the Great Sioux Nation Address in January, tribal leaders said meth addiction is one of the biggest threats to their communities.

The Rosebud Sioux Tribe partnered with Noem's office last year to explore how to address increasing rates of meth addiction among tribal members. Rodney Bordeaux, the tribe's president, said he could use 20 more officers to address meth trafficking. The tribe is working with sheriffs from surrounding counties and will consider working with state police if that goes well.

Jason Cooke, the vice chairman of the Yankton Sioux Tribe, called the tribe's land a "checkerboard reservation" where people can travel between tribal and state land just by crossing the street. This allows drug dealers to evade law enforcement at times, he said.

"We've got to do something ... so we can get it off the reservation," Cooke said.

But the tribe is still split on whether to give state police jurisdiction on tribal land. The tribal council would have to approve an agreement with the state.

Dave Flute, the governor's Secretary of Tribal Relations said Noem's offer represents a chance for "a new narrative moving forward that we do trust each other."

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## University of Wyoming spent \$42,000 fighting records lawsuit

CASPER, Wyo. (AP) — The University of Wyoming paid attorneys more than \$42,000 in an unsuccessful attempt to block the release of records involving a decision not to renew the contract of the school's president.

A judge in January ordered the release of records involving President Laurie Nichols to four news outlets. Donal O'Toole, who was Faculty Senate chair when Nichols was dismissed, called the legal expense "a stupid waste of money."

The records showed university officials investigated interactions between Nichols and employees, leading to a decision by trustees not to renew her contract last summer. Nichols is now president of Black Hills State University in Spearfish, South Dakota.

Released invoices show that Hirst Applegate, a Cheyenne-based law firm hired by the University of Wyoming Board of Trustees to defend it against the media requests, billed the university six times in the latter half of 2019. All but one of those invoices were for \$7,000 or more, according to two of the news outlets that sued, the Casper Star-Tribune and WyoFile.

A voicemail left for board Chairman Dave True was not returned.

The board's top concern in defending against the lawsuit was "safeguarding the confidentiality of those individuals whose comments were factored into the decision" to not renew Nichols' contract, university spokesman Chad Baldwin said in a statement.

"Those individuals were offered assurances of confidentiality in exchange for their willingness to be interviewed, and the board felt it had a responsibility to seek to maintain the privacy of those numerous individuals prior to and after the lawsuit was filed," Baldwin wrote.

The university could've redacted the documents if protecting identities was all the university was concerned about, said Bruce Moats, the attorney who represented the news outlets.

## Revenue projections rise as lawmakers prepare budget

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota lawmakers projected Thursday that they will have more money to work with than previously expected as they craft the state budget this legislative session.

When Gov. Kristi Noem proposed the budget in December, she predicted revenues would be tight as the state recovered from a year of flooding and trade uncertainty. The Legislature's Joint Committee on Appropriations on Thursday approved projections that were more optimistic as revenue rebounded in the last two months. Lawmakers decided they will have roughly \$1.74 billion in revenue for the 2021 budget that starts in July, an increase of \$19 million from what the Republican governor predicted.

In her State of the State address, Noem asked lawmakers to find "extra flexibility" in the budget to fund inflationary pay increases for teachers, state employees and service providers for the first time in three years. The Bureau of Finance and Management estimates that each percentage-point increase in funding will cost about \$16 million.

"The discussion and the math starts today," said Sen. John Wiik, a Republican from Big Stone City.

With the revenue projections in hand, lawmakers can start hammering out the budget. Legislative leaders said that will be a priority for the rest of the session.

Hanging over the financial projections was the prospect of spring flooding, which could impact agriculture — the state's biggest industry. Last year, South Dakota led the nation in unplanted farm acres due to bad weather. With high water levels and a forecast for a wet spring, many lawmakers felt the state should brace for another tough year for farmers.

The state will also lose about \$20 million in tax revenue starting in July when it can no longer tax internet services. Legislators also estimated that the state will lose about \$2 million in taxes because the age for tobacco purchases was raised to 21.

Noem predicted in December that the state budget would total roughly \$4.94 billion once federal dollars and other state funds are added.

She said Thursday that she would like legislators to err on the safe side as they craft the budget.

"We certainly don't want to be in a situation where we put forward a budget that overshoots our revenues and we're back here next year cutting," Noem said.

The governor has proposed three projects that would each cost about \$5 million: funding initiatives for broadband internet across the state, a new School of Health Sciences at University of South Dakota and upgrading the state's emergency response dispatch system. Noem also asked for \$3.7 million to address increasing rates of meth addiction.

She also wants lawmakers to shell out about \$3.5 million to get their proposed industrial hemp program up and running.

Democrats, who hold just three seats on the Joint Committee on Appropriations that approved the revenue projections, said the figures were pessimistic.

Sen. Reynold Nesiba, a Sioux Falls Democrat, called the revenue projections process "contentious and divisive. He wished that lawmakers would have been more optimistic in order to find wiggle room when they have hard budget decisions to make.

Wiik said the projections were just the opposite.

"We're going to have to have a really good year to hit those figures," he said.

## **Flooding seems certain for some along the Missouri River**

**By JOSH FUNK Associated Press**

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — Several states along the Missouri River face an elevated flood risk this spring because the soil remains wet and a significant amount of snow is on the ground in the Dakotas, the National Weather Service said Thursday.

The forecast heightened concerns in areas of Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas and Missouri with levees that still have extensive damage from massive flooding last year and where residents and officials already anticipated some flooding.

"We are very concerned at this point," said Jud Kneuvean, who oversees emergency operations at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Kansas City office.

The weather service said Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas and Missouri and eastern North Dakota and South Dakota face an above-average flood risk this spring. The flood risk is close to normal in Montana and the western half of the Dakotas.

Even in places where the Corps has patched holes in levees that were damaged in last year's flooding, the level of protection may be lower than it was because initial repairs haven't all been done to the full regular height of the levees.

Officials say levee repairs will likely take two years to complete.

The status of levees varies greatly. In Iowa and Nebraska, many of the major levees have been patched, although some breaches remain open. In Kansas and Missouri, much of the repair work has yet to begin.

Part of the problem is that the water remained high for so long in some areas that officials couldn't even assess some of the damage until recently.

In Missouri's hard-hit Holt County, where Tom Bullock serves as emergency management director, repairs have not yet started on the levees that broke and allowed roughly 95,000 acres (38,445.17 hectares) of mostly rural land to flood last spring.

"We're not looking very good for spring," Bullock said.

While most of the breaches around Hamburg, Iowa, have been patched, some repairs probably won't be done before spring, said Fremont County Emergency Manager Mike Crecelius.

"It's not a good outlook no matter how you look at it," Crecelius said.

The Missouri is the longest river in North America, running from western Montana through the Dakotas and touching Nebraska, Iowa and Kansas before cutting across Missouri and entering the Mississippi River at St. Louis. The Corps of Engineers manages the river's flow using six dams and reservoirs in Montana and the Dakotas.

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Even if spring weather is mild, some places could still see flooding when the Corps increases releases from upstream dams on the river to prevent the reservoirs from overflowing.

The Corps estimates 2020 runoff will reach 36.3 million acre-feet (44.8 cubic kilometers) — the ninth highest out of 122 years — so there will likely be significant water releases from the upriver dams. The highest runoff year was 2011 with 61 million acre-feet (75.2 cubic kilometers), followed by 2019, with 60.9 million acre-feet (75.1 cubic kilometers).

Much of the land in low-lying areas nearest the river is cropland, so that often floods first, limiting damage to homes and businesses.

Farmer Gene Walter noted that the private levees that used to protect his cropland north of Council Bluffs, Iowa, remain wide open. Repairs won't be complete in time for typical spring flooding in March. So it could be a day-to-day decision for Walter on which acres to plant.

"You can't even plan or make plans," Walter said. "It's kind of upsetting."

## Man pleads not guilty to assaulting five officers

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — A Rapid City man who was shot by a federal agent during a December pursuit has pleaded not guilty to assaulting five officers with his car.

Uriah Lafferty is accused of assaulting a U.S. marshal, a Highway Patrol trooper and three Oglala Sioux officers in December.

Prosecutors claim Lafferty tried to run the officers over with his vehicle near Hermosa when they tried to arrest him on a federal warrant, KOTA-TV reported.

Lafferty is also charged with conspiracy to distribute at least 50 grams of methamphetamine between August 2014 and December 2019.

If convicted, Lafferty faces up to 40 years in prison.

## Prison staffer assaulted by inmate

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — State corrections officials say a security staff member at the South Dakota State Penitentiary has been injured in an assault by an inmate.

The South Dakota Department of Corrections said the staffer was cut in the face and taken to the hospital for treatment Tuesday. The staff member has returned to work, officials said.

The Argus Leader says the state Division of Criminal Investigation and the prison's special investigation unit are looking into the assault.

## Virus infects more than 1,700 health workers in China, 6 die

By KEN MORITSUGU Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — More than 1,700 Chinese medical workers have been infected by a new virus that has killed nearly 1,400 people and spread to other parts of Asia and as far as the U.S. and Europe, a senior Chinese official announced Friday.

Six of the workers have died, Zeng Yixin, vice director of the National Health Commission, said at a news conference.

The health commission is "highly concerned about this issue" and has issued guidelines for the prevention and control of infection within medical institutions, he said.

Medical workers account for about 3.8% of confirmed cases as of several days ago, Zeng said.

The commission also reported another sizable rise in the number of infections as a result of a new way of counting adopted by Hebei province, the hardest-hit area.

Confirmed cases in mainland China rose to 63,851 by the end of Thursday, up 5,090 from the previous day. The death toll rose 121 to 1,380.

Hubei province is now including cases based on a physician's diagnosis before they have been confirmed by lab tests. Of the 5,090 new cases, 3,095 fell into that category.



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The acceleration in the number of cases does not necessarily represent a sudden surge in new infections of the virus that causes COVID-19 as much as the revised methodology.

The health commission has said that the change was aimed at identifying suspected cases so they can be treated more quickly, though experts also saw it as a reflection of the crush of people seeking treatment and the struggle to keep up with a backlog of untested samples in Hubei and its capital, Wuhan, where the disease first surfaced in December.

In Taiwan, about 100 family members of people stuck in Hubei province protested outside Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council headquarters in the capital, Taipei.

About 1,000 Taiwanese hoping to fly home on charter flights have sparked a dispute between their government and China.

One flight brought 247 people back on Feb. 4. Three were not on a passenger list that Taiwan gave to Chinese authorities and one tested positive for the virus, Taiwan's Central News Agency has reported.

Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council wants China to step up quarantine work and reach agreements with Taiwan on the names of people on priority lists for flights.

China's Taiwan Affairs Office accused Taiwan on Wednesday of "using all kinds of excuses to obstruct and delay" flights. China sees self-ruled Taiwan as part of its territory rather than an independent state.

"We don't want to politicize it, we want charter flights," said protester Chung Chin-ming, chairman of the Chinese Cross-Strait Marriage Coordination Association in Taipei.

Elsewhere, Japan confirmed five more cases, a day after it reported its first death from the virus. Japan now has 256 confirmed cases, including 218 from a cruise ship, the Diamond Princess, that has been quarantined in Yokohama.

Health officials allowed 11 elderly passengers to leave the ship on Friday after they tested negative for the virus. They are the first group of dozens of older passengers expected to get off the vessel before their 14-day quarantine period ends on Feb. 19 to reduce risks of their health deteriorating.

Japanese Health Minister Katsunobu Kato on Thursday said passengers age 80 or older with chronic health issues or in cabins without windows that can open will be able to leave the ship if they pass the virus test.

More than 580 cases have been confirmed outside mainland China and three deaths, one each in the Philippines and Hong Kong and now a Japanese woman in her 80s. Health officials are investigating how she got infected.

In an unprecedented attempt to contain the disease, the Chinese government has placed the hardest-hit cities — home to more than 60 million — under lockdown. People are restricted from entering or leaving the cities, and in many places can only leave their homes or residential complexes for shopping and other daily needs.

Associated Press writers Ralph Jennings in Taipei, Taiwan, and Mari Yamaguchi in Tokyo contributed to this report.

## 2020 Democrats step up attacks to blunt Bloomberg's rise

By WILL WEISSERT and ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Democratic presidential candidates hoping to revive their flagging campaigns increasingly took aim at Mike Bloomberg, blasting their billionaire rival for trying to buy his way into the White House and raising questions about his commitment to racial equality.

Struggling to recover from poor showings in the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary, Elizabeth Warren and Joe Biden took the lead in attacking Bloomberg. Biden, the former vice president, said on ABC's "The View" that "I don't think you can buy an election," while Warren took Bloomberg to task for his 2008 comments that ending redlining, a discriminatory housing practice, helped trigger the economic meltdown.

Biden and billionaire Tom Steyer also joined forces in slamming Bernie Sanders after the Vermont senator and self-described democratic socialist won New Hampshire and essentially tied for the lead in Iowa

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with Pete Buttigieg, the former mayor of South Bend, Indiana. Biden said Sanders hadn't done enough to explain how he'd pay for his "Medicare for All" proposal to replace private insurance with a government-run program. Steyer said that "refusal to tell us how he will pay for his plan adds unnecessary financial risk to achieving health care as a right for every person."

Voters, Steyer said, "should have all the facts."

The sniping reflects the remarkably fluid state of the Democratic race even after two states that typically winnow presidential fields have already voted. The White House hopefuls are trying to blunt Bloomberg, who gained attention by flooding the national airwaves with hundreds of millions of dollars in advertisements and is on the verge of being admitted into next week's presidential debate. And the lagging candidates are trying to prove that they still have the mettle to stay in the race, even if their path is becoming increasingly difficult.

Warren told The Associated Press on Thursday that she has raised \$6 million since the Feb. 3 Iowa caucuses, a haul that could silence questions about whether she will soon leave the campaign because of her disappointing showings so far. She called the race "wide open."

"There's a lot of froth," she said. "It's going to be a long process."

That's especially true as moderates are struggling to coalesce around a candidate. Biden has long argued that he's the most electable, in part because his centrist approach has broad appeal and could make it easier for Democrats to defeat President Donald Trump in the fall. That's at risk of being undermined by his middling finish in Iowa and New Hampshire. He's now staking his campaign on success in the Feb. 29 South Carolina primary, which is the first race in a state with a significant black population.

But before then, candidates will face voters in Nevada, which holds its Democratic caucuses on Feb. 22. Minnesota Sen. Amy Klobuchar, whose moderate presidential campaign surpassed expectations in New Hampshire this week, raced to Nevada after a Senate vote Thursday to try to keep momentum going.

"The political landscape is littered with people who raised more money than Amy Klobuchar," said Tom Nides, a former deputy secretary of state and Democratic donor who served as an intern on Capitol Hill with Klobuchar when they were in college. "Her whole campaign strategy has been based on the fact that she's scrappy. She just grinds it out."

Klobuchar's rise is inviting new scrutiny, especially from Buttigieg, hoping to keep her from eating into his support among moderate Democrats.

Buttigieg, a target of Klobuchar's for weeks over what she has characterized as light experience, Thursday turned his criticism of Washington politics toward the Minnesota senator.

During the LULAC forum, he took aim in a not-so-veiled way at Klobuchar's 2018 vote in the Senate to confirm Customs and Border Protection commissioner Kevin McAleenan, who he criticized for "the horrifying conditions that children were kept in."

"I've heard some people say that, you know, my experience is not relevant because you have to have Washington experience in order to become a president. But some of those same voices are among those who voted to confirm Kevin McAleenan as the CBP head," Buttigieg said.

Biden received more bad news when Nevada's most politically powerful union, the casino workers' Culinary Union, said it wouldn't endorse any of the candidates before the state's caucuses. The former vice president warned his supporters on Wednesday that an endorsement was unlikely, but the confirmation of that was still a blow.

"We've known Vice President Biden for many years. We know he's been our friend," Geoconda Argüello-Kline, the secretary-treasurer for the Culinary Union, said at a Thursday afternoon news conference. "We know all of these candidates, and we respect each one of them."

Buttigieg, who placed second in New Hampshire, is also expected to make a big play for Nevada. But the state could pose a challenge for him as it's the first place he'll have to win over voters of color, something polls have suggested would be difficult.

The result is a muddled middle lane in the primary as Sanders is poised to keep squeaking out victories. On Capitol Hill, Sanders said he thinks "we're on a path to win the nomination."

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"The key to defeating Trump is to have the largest voter turnout in American history," he said. "And I think we have the campaign — for a variety of reasons — to do that."

Backers of more moderate candidates, meanwhile, are beginning to worry. Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., expressed concerns that multiple centrist Democrats in the race might stretch out the primary season.

"We have so many in the primary," said Feinstein, who has backed Biden. "That's what complicates it all. ... It has to sort itself out."

Biden said Bloomberg will have to defend his record on the debate stage, and he said he doubted there would be a contested convention.

"The advantage I have is I've been vetted and vetted and vetted and vetted again," he said at a New York fundraiser on Thursday. "They're just starting on Mike."

Warren opened her speech before a raucous crowd of more than 4,000 at a high school in Arlington, Virginia, on Thursday hitting Bloomberg over redlining.

Of the financial meltdown, she said: "That crisis would not have been averted if the banks had been even bigger racists, and anyone who thinks that should not be the leader of our party," drawing huge cheers and boos for Bloomberg.

As the candidates fight, Bloomberg has tried to appear above the fray, mostly maintaining his focus on the delegate-rich swath of states that vote on March 3. He spent part of Thursday campaigning in North Carolina, where he didn't respond to any of his Democratic rivals' attacks.

"We know the Trump strategy — he makes plans look unaffordable and unreasonable and undoable. Well, that's not going to work against me," Bloomberg told hundreds in Raleigh.

Campaigning with Bloomberg, Steve Benjamin, the mayor of Columbia, South Carolina, said the candidate is "rapidly ascending" in polls and, "as a result, he's going to take a whole lot of incoming fire and arrows."

Bloomberg did opt to hit back at Trump, who has repeatedly mocked the former mayor in a series of tweets. Bloomberg tweeted in response: "We know many of the same people in NY. Behind your back they laugh at you & call you a carnival barking clown. They know you inherited a fortune & squandered it with stupid deals and incompetence. I have the record & the resources to defeat you. And I will."

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Associated Press writers Kathleen Ronayne in Raleigh, N.C., Michelle L. Price in Las Vegas, Alexandra Jaffe in New York and Meg Kinnard in Charleston, S.C., contributed to this report.

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

## AP Explains: Why Syria's M5 is Assad's highway to victory

By ZEINA KARAM Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — It is arguably one of the most coveted prizes in Syria's civil war, and after eight years of fighting, Syrian President Bashar Assad has got it back.

The Damascus-Aleppo highway, or the M5, is known to Syrians simply as the "International Road." Cutting through Syria's major cities, the motorway is key to who controls the country.

Assad gradually lost control over the M5 from 2012, when various rebel groups fighting to topple him began seizing parts of the country.

Protests against his family's rule had erupted the year before amid a wave of uprisings in the Arab world. This soon turned into a civil war, following a brutal government crackdown on dissent and the intervention of foreign powers in the growing conflict.

Historically a bustling trade route, one Syrian analyst, Taleb Ibrahim, called the M5 "the most basic and strategic highway in the Middle East."

For the Turkey-backed rebels fighting Assad, the highway was a cornerstone in holding together their territory and keeping government forces at bay. Its loss marks a mortal blow for opposition fighters whose hold on their last patches of ground in northwestern Syria is looking more and more precarious.

Here's a look at the M5, and its place in Syria's nearly nine-year-long civil war:

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## WHAT IS IT?

The M5 is a strategic highway that starts in southern Syria, near the border with Jordan, and runs all the way north to the city of Aleppo near the Turkish border.

The 450-kilometer (280-mile) highway links the country's four largest cities and population centers: Damascus, Homs, Hama, and Aleppo, cutting through Idlib province.

Before the war, the M5 motorway served as an economic artery for Syria — mainly feeding the country's industrial hub of Aleppo. Experts estimate the road carried business worth \$25 million a day at the height of Syria's trade boom before the war.

The highway was a passageway for the crossing of wheat and cotton from the Syrian east and north to the rest of the country. It was also a road used for the exchange of commodities with regional trade partners like Jordan, Saudi Arabia and other Arab states, as well as Turkey.

## RECOVERING CONTROL

Regaining control over the highway has been a top priority of the Assad government since the early days of the war.

Its slow and tortuous recovery, in many ways, traces the arc of the Syrian war, which has killed nearly half a million people and uprooted half the country's pre-war population.

The Syrian government began winning back segments of the highway, starting in 2014. That's when Russia joined the war on the side of Assad, and essentially tipped it in his favor.

Towns and cities located along parts of the highway, including in the Ghouta region in the suburbs of Damascus, now lie in ruins after long sieges and incessant bombardment forced them into submission. The Russian-backed recapture of Aleppo in December 2016 was another major game-changer.

## END OF THE REBELS' ROAD

Under a September 2018 agreement between Russia and Turkey, the M5 and M4 highways were supposed to be open for traffic, linking the government's stronghold on the coast with Aleppo before the end of that year. That never happened, as insurgents refused to move away and allow joint Russian-Turkish patrols to protect the traffic there.

That eventually led to the latest government offensive in Idlib, the last rebel-held bastion in the country. Government troops backed by Russia carried out several major advances in Idlib, retaking towns and villages on both sides of the motorway. The capture of Khan Sheikhoun was the first major breakthrough, followed by Maaret al-Numan and Saraqeb, located on the intersection between the M4 and M5.

This week, Syrian troops recaptured the last rebel-controlled section of the highway around Khan al-Assal. That brought the road under the full control of Assad's forces for the first time since 2012.

The victory statement came not from the Syrian government, but from Russia's defense ministry. It said in a statement Wednesday that "Syria's most important transport artery" had been "freed" from rebel control.

## WHY IT MATTERS

The highway's capture is possibly the most significant victory for Assad, whose forces have been making solid gains since the end of 2015 with the help of Russian airstrikes and Iran-backed fighters.

Ibrahim, the political analyst, said the highway is so vital because it links the country's two powerhouses — the capital of Damascus with the former trading hub of Aleppo, now mostly in ruins.

"In other words it links Syria's political capital with its economic capital," he said. It also links up with the M4 highway at the Saraqeb knot, opening up traffic to the government's coastal stronghold of Latakia and the port.

Fighting continues in areas near the highway, and much of Idlib province remains in rebel hands.

But the M5's seizure goes a long way to re-connect government-controlled areas, after they had been severed from each other for years.

Associated Press writer Albert Aji in Damascus, Syria, contributed to this report.

## Post-impeachment, House Democrats sharpen focus on Barr

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Democrats frustrated over the Senate's acquittal of President Donald Trump are pushing their oversight efforts toward the Justice Department and what they call Attorney General William Barr's efforts to politicize federal law enforcement.

Democrats have demanded more information about Barr's intervention in the case of Roger Stone, a longtime Trump confidant who was convicted in November of lying to Congress and other charges. Barr this week overruled prosecutors who had recommended that Stone be sentenced to 7 to 9 years in prison.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi criticized Barr on Thursday, calling him one of Trump's "henchmen."

"The attorney general has stooped to such levels," Pelosi said. "What a sad disappointment. The American people deserve better."

The sharpened look at Barr's activities comes at a time when many Democrats appear wary of prolonging the Ukraine inquiry that led to Trump's impeachment. Pelosi and House Intelligence Committee Chairman Adam Schiff have put off — but not ruled out — a subpoena for former National Security Adviser John Bolton, who refused to participate in the House impeachment inquiry but later said he would testify in the Senate trial. Bolton is writing a book.

Issuing a subpoena for Bolton could bring dramatic testimony about Trump's conduct, but also risk a court fight that could take months to resolve. Many Democrats privately say they want to look forward, not backward, and conduct oversight of the Republican president's actions in real time.

First up will be examining whether Barr inappropriately intervened in the Stone case. Stone was convicted of lying to Congress, witness tampering and obstructing the House investigation into whether the Trump campaign coordinated with Russia to tip the 2016 election.

Trump congratulated the attorney general afterward on Twitter. Meanwhile, the four prosecutors on the case immediately withdrew.

The turmoil within the Justice Department has given Democrats a new way forward for their investigations after the sting of the Senate's impeachment acquittal. While there is little interest in pursuing another impeachment case, Democrats want to leverage the power of their majority to conduct oversight as they try to defeat Trump at the polls in November.

"The resignation and defection of these prosecutors is a huge alarm bell going off in our system," said Rep. Jamie Raskin of Maryland, one of the most vocal Democrats on the House Judiciary Committee who pushed for impeachment. "So, that is the immediate emergency."

House Judiciary Committee Chairman Jerrold Nadler announced Wednesday that Barr will testify before the committee March 31 and that lawmakers will ask him about his involvement in the Stone case. People familiar with the committee's plans said there could be other Judiciary committee hearings before then that examine the politicization of the department. The people requested anonymity because the plans aren't yet set.

Barr appeared to try and deflect some of the rising criticism Thursday, saying in an interview with ABC News that Trump's tweets about Justice Department prosecutors and cases "make it impossible for me to do my job." But he also said the decision to undo the sentencing recommendation was made before Trump tweeted about it, and he said the president had not asked him to intervene in any cases.

That answer won't be enough for Democrats, who also want to ask Barr about his decision to take information from Trump's personal lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, about Joe Biden and his son. Those same efforts by Giuliani in Ukraine were at the heart of Trump's impeachment.

"In the past week alone, you have taken steps that raise grave questions about your leadership," the Democrats wrote in a letter to Barr.

The GOP-led Senate has shown less interest in grilling the attorney general. Republicans defended the department's decision to reduce Stone's sentence and said they didn't expect to request Barr's testimony.

"President Trump, in selecting Bill Barr to be attorney general, has done a great service to the people serving in the Department of Justice and our nation as a whole," Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., said in a statement Thursday.

Graham added that Barr has his "complete confidence."

Associated Press writer Lisa Mascaro contributed to this report.

## Prosecutors get final word at Harvey Weinstein's rape trial

By **MICHAEL R. SISK** and **TOM HAYS** Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — By the time prosecutors at Harvey Weinstein's rape trial give their closing argument on Friday, it will have been more than a week since jurors heard one of his accusers recount what prosecutors describe as a vile sexual encounter with the disgraced Hollywood mogul.

In the days since, Weinstein's lawyers have called witnesses who raised doubts about the accusers' testimony, brought in an expert who spoke about memories getting fuzzy over time and offered an epic, hourslong closing argument painting the prosecution's case as a "sinister tale" and the allegations as "regret renamed as rape."

Now, prosecutors look to focus the jury's attention back on the accusers who testified and their harrowing accounts alleging rapes, forced oral sex, groping, masturbation, lewd propositions and casting couch experiences.

Several women testified that Weinstein ignored pleas of "no, no, no" as he assaulted them. The woman Weinstein is charged with raping said he would turn violent when he couldn't get his way and that, "If he heard the word 'no,' it was like a trigger for him."

Another woman recalled Weinstein sneering, "You'll never make it in this business, this is how this industry works," when she laughed off his advances.

Having the last word before jurors hear instructions and start deliberating Tuesday, prosecutors must also answer some of the defense's knocks on their case.

Chief among them: that the two women Weinstein is charged with attacking were opportunists who willingly latched on to the once-powerful producer and acquiesced to sex with him because they thought it would help their careers.

Weinstein, 67, is charged with raping a woman in a Manhattan hotel room in 2013 and forcibly performing oral sex on a different woman, Mimi Haleyi, in 2006. Other accusers testified as part of a prosecution effort to show he used the same tactics to victimize many women over the years.

The Associated Press has a policy of not publishing the names of people who allege sexual assault without their consent. It is withholding name of the rape accuser because it isn't clear if she wishes to be identified publicly.

The prosecution's task has been complicated because the women he's charged with assaulting didn't abandon Weinstein after the alleged encounters.

A psychologist who testified for the prosecution said most sexual assault victims continue to have contact with their attacker. Nevertheless, the defense seized on the continued contact and confronted some accusers with warm emails and other communications with Weinstein that continued for months — or even years — after the alleged attacks.

In her closing argument Thursday, Weinstein lawyer Donna Rotunno accused prosecutors of creating an alternate universe that "strips adult women of common sense, autonomy, and responsibility."

"In their universe, they are not even responsible for sitting at their computers sending emails to someone across the country," Rotunno said in remarks that went on for more than 4½ hours. "In this script the powerful man is the villain and he's so unattractive and large, that no woman would ever want to sleep with him voluntarily. Regret does not exist in this world, only regret renamed as rape."

Assistant District Attorney Joan Illuzzi-Orbon is expected to deliver Friday's closing argument for the prosecution. She is a longtime prosecutor in the Manhattan district attorney's office and a veteran of high-

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profile cases and big moments.

In 2017, she won a conviction in the notorious decadesold case of Etan Patz, a child pictured on milk cartons after he disappeared in 1979. She also led the office's 2011 sex assault case against former International Monetary Fund leader Dominique Strauss-Kahn, which was ultimately dropped.

One thing jurors should expect to hear from Illuzzi in Friday's closing argument is a reminder that Weinstein didn't always look as feeble as he has during the trial.

On Tuesday, after the defense rested and the jury left for the day, Weinstein's lawyers sparred with Illuzzi over her plan to mention how his physical appearance has changed significantly since the time of the alleged assaults.

Weinstein has hobbled into court each day with a walker, parking the device behind the defense table. His lawyers say it's needed because of recent back surgery, but Illuzzi said it seemed more like a prop put there to sway jurors' sympathies.

"I'm not going to argue Mr. Weinstein does not have physical ailments right now," Illuzzi told Judge James Burke. "But I can argue that is not the man these witnesses saw."

On Twitter, follow Michael Sisak at [twitter.com/mikesisak](https://twitter.com/mikesisak) and Tom Hays at [twitter.com/aptomhays](https://twitter.com/aptomhays)

For more coverage of Harvey Weinstein's trial visit: [apnews.com/HarveyWeinstein](https://apnews.com/HarveyWeinstein)

## 10 Things to Know for Today

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

1. 'WHAT A SAD DISAPPOINTMENT' Top House Democrats are planning to investigate what they call Attorney General William Barr's efforts to politicize federal law enforcement.
2. CHINA SEES ANOTHER SPIKE IN VIRUS TOTALS The country's National Health Commission says 121 more people had died, bringing the total to nearly 1,400, and there were 5,090 new confirmed cases.
3. BLOOMBERG TARGETED BY 2020 HOPEFULS They are accusing their billionaire rival of trying to buy his way into the White House and raising questions about his commitment to racial equality.
4. 'I HAVE TO GO TO SAUDI' Thousands of Ethiopians escaping extreme poverty trek to Saudi Arabia in search of work each year, crossing deserts, the sea and a long journey through war-torn Yemen to get to the kingdom.
5. AP: FEDS TO TARGET MEDICARE MARKETERS A government watchdog plans to investigate how telemarketers may be getting hold of seniors' personal Medicare information, a red flag for potential fraud and waste.
6. WHY A HIGHWAY IS KEY IN SYRIA President Bashar Assad reclaims the Damascus-Aleppo highway, a roadway through the country's major cities and a key to control after eight years of civil war.
7. INDIA KEEPS LID ON KASHMIR'S INTERNET Kashmiris are only allowed to access government-approved websites while popular social media sites like Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter remain blocked.
8. 'RED FLAG' LAW REMOVES HUNDREDS OF GUNS A Florida law that allows judges to bar anyone deemed dangerous from possessing firearms has been used 3,500 times since its enactment after the Parkland high school massacre in 2018.
9. WHAT HAS SOME ECONOMISTS CONCERNED Negative interest rates are likely to be a feature of the global economy for years to come and could change the way people save and invest.
10. 'I AM REALLY SORRY' Alex Bregman and his Houston Astros teammates speak about the sign-stealing scheme they used during their 2017 run to a World Series title and again the next season.

## With Britain out, the unwieldy EU faces major budget battle

By RAF CASERT Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — The Brexit drama shook the foundations of the European Union for years and laid bare the need for much-delayed political renovations at the 27-nation bloc. But now that Britain has finally left, where does the EU revamp even start and who is going to foot the bill?

Those questions loom large for EU officials and European leaders alike, because substantial structural changes require some common vision of what a future EU should look like.

Yet even without such unity, the bloc is already a major construction site — with changes pondered in foreign affairs, business, defense and enlargement into the Balkans, just to name a few projects aimed at making the EU reach its full potential.

The clamor for change has come from both outside and inside the bloc, including from French President Emmanuel Macron, EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and the new EU foreign policy chief.

"It all requires a renewal of the European approach," Macron said. "We no longer live in the world of the 1990s."

The EU's lack of clout to match its potential in the world goes well beyond the departure of Britain. The EU's institutional quagmire makes smooth, swift decision-making a pipe dream and its shared euro currency proved quite wobbly during the bloc's financial crisis, which almost saw debt-strapped Greece leave the euro.

But like little else, Brexit brought home the EU's need to change with the times.

Beyond losing an economic giant, the departure of the United Kingdom was also a geopolitical blow to the EU, since Britain is a U.N. Security Council permanent member with nuclear weapons and a standing in the world outside Europe that few other countries can match.

Britain's vote to leave the EU in 2016 was followed by U.S. President Donald Trump's arrival on the world stage. Since then, the feeling has only grown in the EU that its foreign policy has to change to meet the bruising, confrontational challenges of a new age.

"The European Union needs to shoulder greater responsibility for its own security and also step up its geopolitical presence," EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said at the EU parliament this week. "When it comes to something as vital as defense, EU powers are limited."

That calls for some fundamental changes, Borrell said.

For decades now, the EU has tried to be the counterpoint of alpha male superpower politics, spreading its "soft power" brand across the globe based on economic and developmental aid, cultural clout and the promotion of human rights, among other non-coercive strategies.

That system is now close to a breaking point.

"We Europeans must adjust our mental maps to deal with the world as it is, not as we hoped it would be," Borrell wrote in an article last week. "To avoid being the losers in today's U.S.-China competition, we must relearn the language of power."

That will be something made even more difficult without the military clout of Britain. French leader Macron says "Europeans must take more responsibility for European defense."

The EU has been stung by the unraveling of its geopolitical pet project, the 2015 Iran nuclear deal with global powers to make sure that Tehran doesn't produce nuclear weapons. Trump two years ago decided to turn against the deal co-brokered by his predecessor, Barack Obama, and Iran has responded by saying it would ignore some of deal's demands.

Firas Modad, a senior analyst with IHS Markit, issued a downbeat assessment of the EU's stature as it struggled unsuccessfully to keep the Iran nuclear agreement intact.

"Europe is regulated from Washington," he said. "The European banking system depends on the dollar, the European economy depends on the European banking system. The Europeans don't spend on their own defense. The weak don't have a say. Full stop."

Somehow, the EU's 15.3 trillion euro (\$16.6 trillion) economy is not delivering its political equivalent.

The EU can often be held back by unanimity rules that require everybody to be on board before any



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action can be taken. And even as it drops to 27 nations with the loss of Britain, the objections and power of a single EU member can still overwhelm reform plans.

To change this paralysis, many in the EU hope to increase majority voting in more cases.

“With unanimity rules,” Borrell wrote last week, “the risk of paralysis is always present. Member states must realize that using the vetoes weakens not just the union, but also themselves.”

This split between what’s good for the EU and what works best for an individual EU member is at the heart of a budgetary quandary playing out these days at EU headquarters in Brussels. The bloc needs to come up with a new, 1 trillion euro (\$1.09 trillion) EU budget — give or take a few tens of billions — for the next seven-year span.

No EU nation wants to pay more to make up for the 75 billion euro (\$81.5 billion) gap the British have left in the next EU budget, but a great many poorer EU members want to receive at least as much from the bloc as they did in the past. And new projects, like the vaunted Green Deal project for the EU to become climate neutral 2050, need to be funded.

To reconcile the irreconcilable, EU Council President Charles Michel has asked EU leaders to see what their budget demands are and how he can temper them ahead of a special summit next week.

The fight comes down to whether the EU’s budget will be 1%, 1.1% or 1.3% of the bloc’s GDP. That fight over a fraction of a percentage point — as much as lofty goals about the EU’s place in the world — will dominate the EU for the next few months much like Brexit dominated the bloc’s agenda for the last four years.

Still, when EU leaders gather next Thursday for the special summit on the budget their chances of immediate success are considered minimal.

“Arriving at an agreement will therefore be a serious challenge, we all know this,” von der Leyen acknowledged.

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Lori Hinnant contributed from Paris.

## In 2 years, Florida ‘red flag’ law removes hundreds of guns

By TERRY SPENCER Associated Press

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. (AP) — A 23-year-old man who posted on Facebook, “I don’t know why I don’t go on a killing spree.” A West Palm Beach couple who shot up their home while high on cocaine. A 31-year-old Gulf Coast man who pointed a semiautomatic rifle at a motorcyclist.

All four Florida residents had their guns taken away by judges under a “red flag” law the state passed three weeks after a mentally disturbed gunman killed 17 people at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland two years ago Friday.

The law, supported by legislators of both parties, has been applied more than 3,500 times since, with the pace accelerating during the last half of 2019. Even so, an Associated Press analysis of the law showed its use is inconsistent, with some counties and cities using it rarely and others not at all.

Advocates of Florida’s red flag measure say before it existed, it was often difficult to remove firearms from those making threats or suffering severe mental breakdowns. Investigators did not act on reports that the Parkland shooter was threatening to carry out a school massacre. But even if they had, it is likely he would have been allowed to keep his guns because he had no felony convictions or involuntary, long-term mental commitments, they say.

Pinellas County Sheriff Bob Gualtieri, who leads a commission that investigated the massacre’s causes, says the shooter would have easily qualified for a red flag order. Gualtieri says while it is impossible to say that would have prevented the shooting, the gunman wouldn’t have been able to legally buy weapons or ammunition, making his preparation difficult.

“We have needed this law for decades,” said Gualtieri, who started a unit in his department that handles only red flag cases.

But the law also has vocal critics: those who say it violates the U.S. and state constitutions, including

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the right to bear arms, and others who argue that laws already on the books in Florida made it unnecessary. Still others say it discriminates against the poor: Because the hearing with a judge is not a criminal proceeding, low-income defendants aren't provided with a free lawyer.

Sixteen other states plus the District of Columbia have similar laws, 11 of which were enacted after the Feb. 14, 2018, shooting at Stoneman Douglas. President Donald Trump has at times supported a federal proposal, but has not strongly advocated it before Congress.

To get an order in Florida, police agencies must file a request with a civil court, citing serious mental illness or threats a person has made. If the judge agrees, the person must surrender their firearms to police. Within two weeks, a hearing is held during which the judge decides whether to take the person's weapons away for a year. Police agencies can apply for an extension if there is evidence a person remains a threat after a year. If not, the guns are returned.

Orlando attorney Kendra Parris, who is trying to get a case before the state Supreme Court to overturn the law, says it doesn't adequately define some terms, such as what constitutes serious mental health issues. And in any case, she says, other Florida statutes, such as misdemeanor breach of the peace, already allow police to take firearms from the truly dangerous before they act. That statute could easily have been invoked against the Stoneman Douglas shooter, she said.

"Probably two dozen times this guy could have been charged for breach of the peace and had his firearms removed," Parris said.

The AP analysis shows that from March 2018, when the law was enacted, through December 2019, there was a wide disparity in its per capita usage in Florida's 67 counties. Twenty issued at least one for every 5,500 residents during that time period, the statewide average. Three issued at least one for every 2,000 residents, including Gualtieri's Pinellas County, which includes the Tampa Bay area, and has nearly 1 million people. Highlands County, near Lake Okeechobee, ranked No. 1, issuing one for every 850 residents.

On the other extreme, 12 counties issued one for every 30,000 residents or less. Two neighboring Panhandle counties — Escambia and Santa Rosa — issued one for every 100,000 residents or more. Another nine small, rural counties issued none.

Highlands County Sheriff Paul Blackman said he doesn't know why his county is No. 1, but he noted that his deputies average two calls daily for mental health crises. The county has just over 100,000 residents and was the scene of a bank shooting last year that left five women dead.

"If someone has made a threat to hurt themselves or others and is intent on using a firearm, we will try to get a risk protection order against them so we can take away those guns," Blackman said. But even the law isn't a guarantee: Two Highlands men who received orders still killed themselves, one with carbon monoxide and the other with an illegally obtained gun, he said.

The sheriffs whose counties had no or few red flag orders during the reviewed period said in an AP questionnaire that they are not philosophically opposed to the law — they just haven't needed it.

Santa Rosa Sheriff Bob Johnson said it was a "fluke" that his county of 155,000 had only issued one order. Baker County Maj. Randy Crews explained that the lack of red flag orders from his county on the Georgia border west of Jacksonville has to do with the fact that his deputies know most of the 27,000 residents and can intercede quickly if someone is having a breakdown and making threats.

Crews said most potential red flag cases are asked to surrender their guns to a relative, who is told to not return them until the person finishes mental health treatment. He said that approach works better than confrontation and has never backfired. He said the office would not hesitate to use the law, however, if someone didn't cooperate.

## China's virus crackdown leaves millions working at home

By JOE McDONALD AP Business Writer

BEIJING (AP) — In the middle of a phone call with a customer, an important visitor knocks on Michael Xiong's door: his 3-year-old son.

Xiong, a salesman in Chibi, a city near the center of a virus outbreak, is one of millions of people in

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China who are obeying government orders to work from home as part of the most sweeping anti-disease measures ever imposed.

After breakfast, Xiong leaves the 3-year-old and his 10-month-old brother with their grandparents. The salesman for IQAir, a Swiss maker of household air purifiers that are popular in China's smog-choked cities, goes into a bedroom to talk to customers and try to find new ones by phone and email.

His son "comes to knock on the door when I am in a meeting, asking for hugs," Xiong said. "I put myself on mute, open the door and tell him I will be with him later, and he is fine with that."

Most access to Wuhan, a city of 11 million people where Xiong usually works, was cut off Jan. 23 and some other cities have imposed travel restrictions. Controls imposed on business to try to stem the spread of infection extend nationwide, affecting tens of thousands of companies and hundreds of millions of employees.

The government extended the Lunar New Year holiday to keep factories and offices closed. Cinemas, temples and other tourist sites were shut down to prevent crowds from forming. Group tours were canceled and businesspeople told to put off travel.

China's vast manufacturing industries cannot function without workers in factories. But as some businesses reopen, Beijing has told anyone who still can work from home to stay there.

That is forcing employees, from solo entrepreneurs to automaker Volkswagen AG's 3,500-member headquarters staff in Beijing, to stay in touch with customers and business partners and keep companies functioning by phone and email.

Millions of Chinese entrepreneurs operate house-cleaning, small trading and other businesses out of their homes. Many have suffered the same impact as bigger businesses from restrictions on movement and orders to families to stay indoors.

Maggie Zhang, co-founder of SheTalks, a company in Beijing that organizes events for women, is working out of her parents' apartment in the northwestern city of Zhangye in Gansu province. She went for the Lunar New Year and said she might stay through March.

Zhang temporarily stopped organizing talks and other public events and is gathering material for her company's social media account to attract users.

In the morning, "I will do some interviews over the phone or online with women working at the front in fighting the epidemic and sometimes foreign businesswomen working in China," said Zhang. "When I am working, my parents always try to keep quiet and not disturb me."

Zhang said she uses the sunny living room to write and moves to a bedroom to do interviews or talk to colleagues. She works out on an elliptical machine during those calls "because my mind works faster when I exercise."

Numbers of new virus cases reported daily have declined, but economists warn against assuming the disease and its impact on the world's second-largest economy might soon be under control.

Quarantines in the central province of Hubei, which surrounds Wuhan, and some neighboring areas still are in place. Many large companies have told employees to stay home.

"A return to normal isn't yet in sight," said Roger Diwan of IHS Markit in a report.

Many employees already were equipped to work from home due to China's almost universal adoption of smartphones, the internet and messaging and video call services, including the popular WeChat operated by Tencent Holdings Ltd.

China is "probably one of the best countries to do this," said Michael Mayer, who is in charge of marketing for the Volkswagen auto brand in China. A 27-year veteran of VW, he came to China from India three years ago.

"This would be hard to do in Europe. People here are much more open to using digital tools," said Mayer. "As sad as it sounds, this is the best place for us to try this experiment."

After breakfast with his three teenagers, Mayer moves into a back room of their Beijing apartment to talk with coworkers by phone and video call while his children study in their bedrooms. They meet again for lunch.

"Now everybody's at home," said Mayer. "Not too bad. Actually quite interesting and quite pleasant."

Volkswagen plans to reopen its Beijing offices on Monday but is waiting for updates from health authorities, said Mayer.

Xiong of IQAir expressed frustration at not being able to make his sales pitch to potential clients face to face but said the quarantine gives him more time with his son.

Xiong and his wife are among millions of parents who also looking after children who are cooped up at home because schools have been closed indefinitely. Xiong said he helps his son with lessons sent over WeChat by the kindergarten.

"Usually, when I get home from work, it is almost time for his bath and bed," said Xiong. "Now that we spend time together every day, I think I know my child more and he relies on me more. Our connection is stronger, and so is the whole family."

Many have barely set foot outdoors for almost three weeks.

Cities including Hangzhou, an industrial metropolis of 10 million people southwest of Shanghai that is home to e-commerce giant Alibaba, are allowing only one household member out each day to buy food.

Apartment complexes in Beijing and other cities have been ordered to check visitors for fever. Many allow only residents to enter.

Zhang said she has left her parents' complex only once to go shopping. She was nearly barred by security guards from returning.

"There are almost no people or cars on the street," she said.

Ray Cheng, a Macau-born entrepreneur in the southern city of Guangzhou, said he starts the day by making a plan for his 7-year-old daughter and 5-year-old son — "what they need to do, then lunch, then what to do" — and then gets on the phone with his employees and customers.

"When I work, I arrange for them to do something they like. They are very focused and won't bother me," Cheng told a reporter. "Right now they are watching 'Lion King' so I can talk to you."

IQAir's China sales manager, Mike Bearden, said he usually spends 50% of his time on the road but has been at home in Beijing for three weeks talking by phone with potential customers. He said sales might get a boost from the virus because families and hospitals are thinking more about clean air.

"It's probably the longest stretch I've stayed in Beijing in the last 10 years," said Bearden, a Canadian-American who grew up in Seattle. "My exercise is basically pacing my apartment while having phone conversations."

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Associated Press researcher Yu Bing contributed to this report.

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This story has been corrected to show that Zhang is co-founder of SheTalks.

## **Virus renews safety concerns about slaughtering wild animals**

**By SAM McNEIL and CANDICE CHOI Associated Press**

BEIJING (AP) — China cracked down on the sale of exotic species after an outbreak of a new virus in 2002 was linked to markets selling live animals. The germ turned out to be a coronavirus that caused SARS.

The ban was later lifted, and the animals reappeared. Now another coronavirus is spreading through China, so far killing 1,380 people and sickening more than 64,000 — eight times the number sickened by SARS.

The suspected origin? The same type of market.

With more than 60 million people under lockdown in more than a dozen Chinese cities, the new outbreak is prompting calls to permanently ban the sale of wildlife, which many say is being fueled by a limited group of wealthy people who consider the animals delicacies. The spreading illness also serves as a grim reminder that how animals are handled anywhere can endanger people everywhere.

"There's a vast number of viruses in the animal world that have not spread to humans, and have the potential to do so," said Robert Webster, an expert on influenza viruses at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee.

SARS and the current outbreak of COVID-19 are not the only diseases in people traced back to animals.

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The killing and sale of what is known as bushmeat in Africa is thought to be a source for Ebola. Bird flu likely came from chickens at a market in Hong Kong in 1997. Measles is believed to have evolved from a virus that infected cattle.

Scientists have not yet determined exactly how the new coronavirus first infected people. Evidence suggests it originated in bats, which infected another animal that spread it to people at a market in the southeastern city of Wuhan. The now-shuttered Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market advertised dozens of species such as giant salamanders, baby crocodiles and raccoon dogs that were often referred to as wildlife, even when they were farmed.

Of the 33 samples from the Wuhan market that tested positive for the coronavirus, officials say 31 were from the area where wildlife booths were concentrated. Compared with long domesticated livestock like chickens and pigs, researchers say less is known about the viruses that circulate in wild animals.

The Wuhan market was also like many other "wet markets" in Asia and elsewhere, where animals are tied up or stacked in cages. Activists say it's difficult to distinguish between those that were legally farmed and those that may have been illegally hunted. The animals are often killed on site to ensure freshness. The messy mix raises the tiny odds that a new virus will jump to people handling the animals and start to spread, experts say.

"You've got live animals, so there's feces everywhere. There's blood because of people chopping them up," said Peter Daszak, president of EcoHealth Alliance, which works to protect wildlife and public health from emerging diseases.

And more frequent global travel and trade means there's greater risk for outbreaks to spread, Daszak said.

China's taste for wildlife is relatively new, prompted by the country's economic growth, said Peter Li, who studies Chinese politics at the University of Houston. But with the outbreak upending lives across the country, many on Chinese social media are expressing frustration that rich people's appetite for wild animals is again endangering everyone else.

"This is the second time ... the first is SARS, this time is Wuhan. We don't want a third time," Lai Jinping, a project cost assessor, said by phone from her home in Sichuan.

"We hate them too, and we are blamed," said Tao Yiwei, a 36-year-old homemaker. She is among those who want the temporary ban on wildlife, enacted to contain the current outbreak, to be permanent.

There are signs the Chinese government may make more lasting changes to how exotic species are raised and sold. This month, Chinese leader Xi Jinping said the country should "resolutely outlaw and harshly crack down" on the illegal wildlife trade because of the public health risks it poses.

In the eastern province of Anhui, officials sealed farms breeding species like badgers and bamboo rats. In the port city of Tianjin, authorities say their crackdown on the sale of wildlife caught six traders, including three who were selling pythons and parrots.

All told, officials say about 1.5 million markets and online operators nationwide have been inspected since the outbreak began. About 3,700 have been shut down, and around 16,000 breeding sites have been cordoned off.

It's not clear how the measures will play out over time. Before the outbreak began, it was legal in China to sell 54 species like pangolins and civets — as long as they were raised on farms. That made it difficult to distinguish between legal and illegal wildlife in wet markets, and enforcement was lax, said Jinfeng Zhou of China Biodiversity, Conservation and Green Development Foundation, an environmental group based in Beijing.

He pointed to a widely shared image of a Wuhan market advertisement listing 72 species, including peacocks and bullfrogs, as proof that the trade is too lucrative to be stopped by anything less than a total ban on all wildlife. "The profit is huge ... like drugs," Jinfeng said.

Others disagree, arguing that banning the wildlife trade is not a realistic way to reduce risk, especially in poorer regions of the world where it can be an important food source. They say improved monitoring, regulation or public education may better control the problem. When wildlife is farmed, for example, it allows for greater surveillance and testing for viruses, said Daszak of EcoHealth Alliance.

Even if China successfully regulates or bans it, the wildlife trade is likely to continue elsewhere. Recent visits to wet markets in the island of Sulawesi in Indonesia and in the coastal city of Doula in Cameroon revealed similar conditions to wet markets in China. Vendors were slaughtering and grilling bats, dogs, rats, crocodiles and snakes, and sanitary measures were scant.

Ongoing destruction of species' habitats will likely bring people into closer contact with animals and their viruses, said Raina Plowright, a University of Montana researcher who studies how diseases spread from wildlife to people.

"We are inevitably going to be exposed," she said.

Associated Press writers Niniek Karmini in Jakarta, Indonesia, Maria Cheng in London, Malcolm Ritter and Kathy Young in New York, and researchers Liu Zheng and Yu Bing in Beijing, and Chen Si in Shanghai contributed to this report.

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## Feds to track how private Medicare info gets to marketers

By RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A government watchdog plans to launch a nationwide probe into how telemarketers may be getting hold of seniors' personal Medicare information, a red flag for potential fraud and waste.

An official with the Health and Human Services inspector general's office told The Associated Press the audit will be announced next week. It would follow a narrower probe which found that an electronic system designed for pharmacies to verify Medicare coverage was being used for searches that appeared to have nothing to do with filling prescriptions. The official spoke on condition of anonymity ahead of a formal announcement.

The watchdog agency's decision comes amid a wave of relentlessly efficient telemarketing scams targeting Medicare recipients and involving everything from back braces to DNA cheek swabs.

For years, seniors have been admonished not to give out their Medicare information to people they don't know. But a report on the initial probe, provided to the AP, details how sensitive details can still get to telemarketers when a Medicare beneficiary thinks he or she is dealing with a trustworthy entity such as a pharmacy or doctor's office.

Key personal details gleaned from Medicare's files can then be cross-referenced with databases of individual phone numbers, allowing marketers to home in with their calls. The report is being released Friday.

The initial audit focused on 30 pharmacies and other service providers that were frequently pinging a Medicare system created for drugstores.

The electronic system is intended to be used for verifying a senior's eligibility at the sales counter. It can validate coverage and personal details on millions of individuals. Analyzing records that covered 2013-15, investigators discovered that most of the audited pharmacies, along with a software company and a drug compounding service also scrutinized, weren't necessarily filling prescriptions.

Instead, they appeared to have been tapping into the system for potentially inappropriate marketing.

Medicare stipulates that the electronic queries — termed "E1 transactions" — are supposed to be used to bill for prescriptions. But investigators found that some pharmacies submitted tens of thousands of queries that could not be matched to prescriptions. In one case, a pharmacy submitted 181,963 such queries but only 41 could be linked to prescriptions.

The report found that on average 98% of the electronic queries from 25 service providers in the initial audit "were not associated with a prescription." The inspector general's office did not identify the pharmacies and service providers.

Pharmacies are able to access coverage data on Medicare recipients by using a special provider number from the government.

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But investigators found that four of the pharmacies they audited allowed marketing companies to use their provider numbers to ping Medicare. "This practice of granting telemarketers access to E1 transactions, or using E1 transactions for marketing purposes puts the privacy of the beneficiaries' (personal information) at risk," the report said.

Some pharmacies also used seniors' information to contact doctors treating those beneficiaries to see if they would write prescriptions. Citing an example, the report said, "The doctor often informed (one) provider that the beneficiary did not need the medication."

The inspector general's office said it is investigating several health care providers for alleged fraud involving E1 transactions. Inappropriate use of Medicare's eligibility system is probably just one of many little-known paths through which telemarketers can get sensitive personal information about beneficiaries, investigators said.

The watchdog agency began looking into the matter after the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, or CMS, asked for an audit of a mail order pharmacy's use of Medicare's eligibility verification system.

In a formal response to the report, CMS Administrator Seema Verma said CMS retooled its verification system last year so it automatically kicks out queries that aren't coming from a pharmacy. More than a quarter-million such requests have been rejected, she wrote.

Medicare is committed to ensuring that the system is used appropriately, Verma added. The agency can revoke access for pharmacies that misuse the privilege and is exploring other enforcement options.

The inspector general's office acknowledged Medicare's countermeasures but said it wants to see how effective they've been.

Health care fraud is a pervasive problem that costs taxpayers tens of billions of dollars a year. Its true extent is unknown, and some cases involve gray areas of complex payment policies.

In recent years, Medicare has gotten more sophisticated, adapting techniques used by financial companies to try to head off fraud. Law enforcement coordination has grown, with strike forces of federal prosecutors and agents, along with state counterparts, specializing in health care investigations.

Officials gave no timetable for completing the audit.

## Trump wants \$1.5B over 10 years to revive US uranium mining

By BRADY McCOMBS and ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — The Trump administration is asking Congress for \$1.5 billion over 10 years to create a new national stockpile of U.S.-mined uranium, saying that propping up U.S. uranium production in the face of cheaper imports is a matter of vital energy security.

But some Democratic lawmakers, and market analysts across the political spectrum, charge that the Trump administration's overall aim is really about helping a few uranium companies that can't compete in the global market. Demand for the nuclear fuel has languished worldwide since Japan's 2011 Fukushima disaster. U.S. uranium production has plummeted 96% in the last five years, the U.S. Energy Information Administration reported Thursday.

Trump made the request for a new national uranium reserve in his 2021 budget request this week — the latest illustration that trying to rescue the U.S. nuclear and coal industries is a political priority for the Republican president who often invokes national security as justification.

"It's not the responsibility of the taxpayer to bail out an industry, whether that's uranium, solar, coal, what have you," said Katie Tubb, a senior energy policy analyst at the conservative Washington Heritage Foundation.

The Energy Department said the plan would boost work for at least a couple of the U.S. West's nearly dormant uranium operations, although residents near one of the mines say they fear an increase in radioactive threats.

"Whatever Trump does, we'll be standing our ground to let the people know that we're not going to give up," said Yolanda Badback, a resident of White Mesa, Utah, a town of 200 people on the Ute Mountain Indian Reservation that is near a uranium mill in southern Utah.

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Trump's plan would need approval from a highly partisan Congress. Rep. Raul Grijalva, an Arizona Democrat and chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee, has opposed Trump's effort to make domestic uranium mining a strategic issue. His aides said they needed to see more details from the administration on the stockpile proposal.

Demand for nuclear and coal power sources has fallen against marketplace competition from ever-cheaper natural gas and renewable wind and solar. Trump has been unable to stop a string of coal and nuclear power plant closings.

The U.S. nuclear industry has sought help from the Trump administration, including asking for taxpayer subsidies to promote use of U.S. uranium. U.S. nuclear power plants in 2018 got 90 percent of their uranium from Canada, Kazakhstan and other foreign suppliers, and only 10 percent from U.S. mines.

Trump in 2019 rejected a request from U.S. uranium mining operators that he set a minimum quota for domestic uranium. But he agreed to set up a task force of national security, military and other federal officials to look for other ways to revive domestic production of the whole nuclear fuel supply chain.

That task force's findings are expected within two weeks. Trump's budget proposal would be part of an effort "to put the United States back in the nuclear game around the world," Energy Secretary Dan Brouillette told reporters Monday.

While Trump has called propping up U.S. uranium mining essential to national security, the Energy Department acknowledged in its budget presentation that "no immediate national security need has been identified" for the uranium reserve. The same document contends that the funds aren't meant to "disrupt market mechanisms."

"That is exactly what it is designed to do," said Luke J. Danielson, president of Colorado-based Sustainable Development Strategies Group, which advises foreign governments about mineral policies.

"The history of the government of trying to subsidize the energy sector and pick winners and losers is abysmal," Danielson added.

Many Democratic lawmakers have challenged Trump's security argument for domestic uranium. Existing uranium reserves and production and trade with allies Australia and Canada were already adequate to securing the U.S. uranium supply, Rep. Alan Lowenthal, a California Democrat, said last year.

The Energy Department didn't say which U.S. uranium mines would benefit from the proposal, but the Nuclear Energy Industry trade group pointed to existing mines in Wyoming as likely candidates.

"It's a good step to show that the administration recognizes the strategic value" of the U.S. nuclear industry, said Nima Ashkeboussi, the group's director of fuel cycles programs. "We expect more good signals to come out" with the upcoming report from Trump's nuclear fuels task force.

Energy Fuels Inc., a Canadian-owned company with an office in Colorado, called the Trump proposal "a good lifeline for the industry." Spokesman Curtis Moore acknowledged that the company is likely to benefit since it has operating mines in east-central Wyoming and southern Utah.

Moore said the program should lead to production of 2.5 million pounds of uranium per year. U.S. uranium mines produced less than 174,000 pounds in 2019, according to Thursday's Energy Information Administration report. That's down from 4.9 million pounds in 2014.

Energy Fuels recently laid off nearly one-third of the company's 79 employees at the White Mesa Mill in Wyoming and La Sal Complex mines in Utah, he said.

At another mine, the Nichols Ranch facility in east-central Wyoming, nearby residents participate in a yearly protest walk to draw attention to negative impacts the mine has on an otherwise wide open and remote stretch of land.

Former mine owner Uranerz Energy Corp. in 2014 agreed to pay a \$5,000 state fine for two spills that year of more than 30,000 gallons (114,000 liters) of uranium-bearing solution.

Knickmeyer reported from Washington. Associated Press writer Mead Gruver in Cheyenne, Wyoming, contributed to this report.



## Ethiopians brave deserts and smugglers on the way to Saudi

By **MAGGIE MICHAEL, NARIMAN EL-MOFTY and MAAD AL-ZEKRI** Associated Press

LAC ASSAL, Djibouti (AP) — "Patience," Mohammed Eissa told himself.

He whispered it every time he felt like giving up. The sun was brutal, reflecting off the thick layer of salt encrusting the barren earth around Lac Assal, a lake 10 times saltier than the ocean.

Nothing grows here. Birds are said to fall dead out of the sky from the searing heat. And yet the 35-year-old Ethiopian walked on, as he had for three days, since he left his homeland for Saudi Arabia.

Nearby are two dozen graves, piles of rocks, with no headstones. People here say they belong to migrants who like Eissa embarked on an epic journey of hundreds of miles, from villages and towns in Ethiopia through the Horn of Africa countries Djibouti or Somalia, then across the sea and through the war-torn country of Yemen.

The flow of migrants taking this route has grown. According to the U.N.'s International Organization for Migration, 150,000 arrived in Yemen from the Horn of Africa in 2018, a 50% jump from the year before. The number in 2019 was similar.

This story is part of an occasional series, "Outsourcing Migrants," produced with the support of the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting.

They dream of reaching Saudi Arabia, and earning enough to escape poverty by working as laborers, housekeepers, servants, construction workers and drivers.

But even if they reach their destination, there is no guarantee they can stay; the kingdom often expels them. Over the past three years, the IOM reported 9,000 Ethiopians were deported each month.

Many migrants have made the journey multiple times in what has become an unending loop of arrivals and deportations.

Eissa is among them. This is his third trip to Saudi Arabia.

In his pockets, he carries a text neatly handwritten in Oromo, his native language. It tells stories of the Prophet Muhammad, who fled his home in Mecca to Medina to seek refuge from his enemies.

"I depend on God," Eissa said.

"I HAVE TO GO TO SAUDI"

Associated Press reporters traveled along part of the migrants' trail through Djibouti and Yemen in July and August. Eissa was among the travelers they met; another was Mohammad Ibrahim, who comes from Arsi, the same region as Eissa.

Perched in the country's central highlands, it's an area where subsistence farmers live off small plots of land, growing vegetables or grain. When the rains come, the families can eat. But in the dry months of the summer, food dwindles and hunger follows.

The 22-year-old Ibrahim had never been able to find a job. His father died when his mother was pregnant with him — she told him stories of how his father went off to war and never returned.

One day, Ibrahim saw a friend in his village with a new motorcycle. He was making a little money carrying passengers. Ibrahim went to his mother and asked her to buy him one. He could use it, he told her, to support her and his sister. Impossible, she said. She would have to sell her tiny piece of land where they grow corn and barley.

"This is when I thought, 'I have to go to Saudi,'" Ibrahim said.

So he reached out to the local "door opener" -- a broker who would link him to a chain of smugglers along the way.

Often migrants are told they can pay when they arrive in Saudi Arabia. Those who spoke to the AP said they were initially quoted prices ranging from \$300 to \$800 for the whole journey.

How the trip goes depends vitally on the smuggler.

In the best-case scenario, the smuggler is a sort of tour organizer. They arrange boats for the sea crossing, either from Djibouti or Somalia. They run houses along the way where migrants stay and provide transport from town to town in pickup trucks. Once in Saudi Arabia, the migrants call home to have pay-

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ment wired to the smuggler.

In the worst case, the smuggler is a brutal exploiter, imprisoning and torturing migrants for more money, dumping them alone on the route or selling them into virtual slave labor on farms.

Intensified border controls and crackdowns by the Ethiopian government, backed by European Union funding, have eliminated some reliable brokers, forcing migrants to rely on inexperienced smugglers, increasing the danger.

## THE LONG WALK

Eissa decided he would not use smugglers for his journey.

He'd successfully made the trip twice before. The first time, in 2011, he worked as a steel worker in the kingdom, making \$ 25 a day and earning enough to buy a plot of land in the Arsi region's main town, Asella. He made the trip again two years later, walking for two months to reach Saudi Arabia, where he earned \$ 530 a month as a janitor. But he was arrested and deported before he could collect his pay.

Without a smuggler, his third attempt would be cheaper. But it would not be safe, or easy.

Eissa picked up rides from his home to the border with Djibouti, then walked. His second day there, he was robbed at knifepoint by several men who took his money. The next day, he walked six hours in the wrong direction, back toward Ethiopia, before he found the right path again.

When the AP met him at Lac Assal, Eissa said he had been living off bread and water for days, taking shelter in a rusty, abandoned shipping container. He had a small bottle filled with water from a well at the border, covered with fabric to keep out dust.

He had left behind a wife, nine sons and a daughter. His wife cares for his elderly father. The children work the farm growing vegetables, but harvests are unpredictable: "If there's no rain, there's nothing."

With the money he expected to earn in Saudi Arabia, he planned to move his family to Asella. "I will build a house and take my children to town to learn the religious and worldly sciences," he said.

## THE TRIP

The 100-mile (120-kilometer) trip across Djibouti can take days.

Many migrants end up in the country's capital, also named Djibouti, living in slums and working to earn money for the crossing. Young women often are trapped in prostitution or enslaved as servants.

The track through Djibouti ends on a long, virtually uninhabited coast outside the town of Obock, the shore closest to Yemen.

There, the AP saw a long line of dozens of migrants led by smuggling guides, descending from the mountains onto the rocky coastal plain. Here they would stay, sometimes for several days, and wait for their turn on the boats that every night cross the narrow Bab el-Mandab strait to Yemen.

During the wait, smugglers brought out large communal pots of spaghetti and barrels of water for their clients. Young men and women washed themselves in nearby wells. Others sat in the shade of the scrawny, twisted acacia trees. Two girls braided each other's hair.

One young man, Korram Gabra, worked up the nerve to call home to ask his father for the equivalent of \$200 for the crossing and the Yemen leg of the trip. It would be his first time talking with his father since he sneaked away from home in the night.

"My father will be upset when he hears my voice, but he'll keep it in his heart and won't show it," he said. "If I get good money, I want to start a business."

At night, AP witnessed a daily smuggling routine: small lights flashing in the darkness signaled that their boat was ready. More than 100 men and women, boys and girls were ordered to sit in silence on the beach. The smugglers spoke in hushed conversations on satellite phones to their counterparts in Yemen on the other side of the sea. There was a moment of worry when a black rubber dinghy appeared out in the water—a patrol of Djibouti's marines. After half an hour it motored away. The marines had received their daily bribe of around \$100 dollars, the smugglers explained.

Loaded into the 50-foot-long open boat, migrants were warned not to move or talk during the crossing. Most had never seen the sea before. Now they would be on it for eight hours in darkness.

Eissa made the crossing on another day, paying about \$65 to a boat captain -- the only payment to a smuggler he would make.

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## "IT WAS A TERRIBLE THING"

Ibrahim took an alternative route, through Somalia. He traveled nearly 900 kilometers (500 miles), walking and catching rides to cross the border and reach the town of Las Anoud.

Isolated in Somalia's deserts, the town is the hub for traffickers transporting Ethiopians to Yemen. It is also a center for brutal torture, according to multiple migrants. The smugglers took Ibrahim and other migrants to a compound, stripped him and tied him dangling from a wooden rafter. They splashed cold water on him and flogged him.

For 12 days, he was imprisoned, starved and tortured. He saw six other migrants die of severe dehydration and hunger, their bodies buried in shallow graves nearby. "It's in the middle of the vast desert," he said. "If you think of running away, you don't even know where to go."

At one point, smugglers put a phone to his ear and made him plead with his mother for ransom money. "Nothing is more important than you," she told him. She sold the family's sole piece of land and wired to smugglers just over \$1,000.

The smugglers transported him to the port of Bosaso on Somalia's Gulf of Aden coast. He was piled into a wooden boat with some 300 other men and women, "like canned sardines," he said.

Throughout the 30-hour journey, the Somali captain and his crew beat anyone who moved. Crammed in place, the migrants had to urinate and vomit where they sat.

"I felt trapped, couldn't breathe, or move for many hours until my body became stiff," he said. "God forbid, it was a terrible thing."

Within sight of Yemen's shore, the smugglers pushed the migrants off the boat into water too deep to touch the bottom.

Flailing in the water, they formed human chains to help the women and children onto shore.

Ibrahim collapsed on the sand and passed out. When he opened his eyes, he felt the hunger stabbing him.

## "FAR FROM MY DREAMS"

Migrants with reliable, organized smugglers are usually transported across Yemen in stages to the migrant hub cities further down the line, Ataq, Marib, Jawf, and Saada where half the distance is under internationally-recognized government control and the second under Houthi rebels, fighting US-backed coalition since 2015.

But for thousands of others, it's a confusing and dangerous march down unfamiliar roads and highways.

A security official in Lahj province outside the main southern city, Aden, said bodies of dead migrants turn up from time to time. Just a few days earlier, he told the AP, a farmer called his office about a smell coming from one of his fields. A patrol found a young migrant there who had been dead for days.

Another patrol found 100 migrants, including women, hidden on a farm, the official said. The patrol brought them food, he said, but then had to leave them.

"Where would we take them and what would we do with them?" he asked, speaking on condition of anonymity because he wasn't authorized to talk to the press.

Many migrants languish for months in the slums of Basateen, a district of Aden that was once a green area of gardens but now is covered in decrepit shacks of cinder blocks, concrete, tin and tarps, amid open sewers.

Over the summer, an Aden soccer stadium became a temporary refuge for thousands of migrants. At first, security forces used it to house migrants they captured in raids. Other migrants showed up voluntarily, hoping for shelter. The IOM distributed food at the stadium and arranged voluntary repatriation back home for some. The soccer pitch and stands, already destroyed from the war, became a field of tents, with clothes lines strung up around them.

Among the migrants there was Nogos, a 15-year-old who was one of at least 7,000 minors who made the journey without an adult in 2019, a huge jump from 2,000 unaccompanied minors a year earlier, according to IOM figures

Upon landing in Yemen, Nogos had been imprisoned by smugglers. For more than three weeks, they beat him, demanding his family send \$500. When he called home, his father curtly refused: "I'm not the

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one torturing you.”

Nogos can't blame his father. "If he had money and didn't help me, I'd be upset," he said. "But I know he doesn't."

Finally, the smugglers gave up on getting money out of the boy and let him go. Alone and afraid at the stadium, he had no idea what he'd do next. He had hoped to reach an aunt who is living in Saudi Arabia, but lost contact with her. He wanted one day to go back to school.

"It's far from my dreams," he added, in a dead voice.

After a few weeks, Yemeni security forces cleared out the stadium, throwing thousands back onto the streets. The IOM had stopped distributing food, fearing it would become a lure for migrants. Yemeni officials didn't want to take responsibility for the migrants' care.

Eissa, meanwhile, made his way across the country alone. At times, Yemenis gave him a ride for a stretch. Mostly he walked endless miles down the highways.

"I don't count the days. I don't distinguish, Saturday, Sunday, or Monday," he said in audio message to the AP via Whatsapp.

One day, he reached the town of Bayhan, southern Yemen, and went to the local mosque to use the bathroom. When he saw the preacher giving his sermon, he realized it was Friday.

It was the first time in ages he was aware of the day of the week.

He had traveled more than 250 miles (420 kilometers) since he landed in Yemen. He had another 250 miles to go to the Saudi border.

"PRAY FOR ME"

In the evenings, thousands of migrants mill around the streets of Marib, one of the main city stopovers on the migrants' route through Yemen. In the mornings, they search for day jobs. They could earn about a dollar a day working on nearby farms. A more prized job is with the city garbage collectors, paying \$4 a day.

Ibrahim had just arrived a few days earlier when the AP met him, his black hair still covered in dust from the road.

Ibrahim had wandered in Yemen for days, starving, before villagers gave him food.

He made his way slowly north. Not knowing the language or the geography, he didn't even know what town he was in when a group of armed fighters snatched him from the road.

They imprisoned him for days in a cell with other migrants. One night, they moved the migrants in a pickup, driving them through the desert. Ibrahim was confused and afraid: Where was he going? Who had abducted him? Why?

He threw himself out of the back of the pick-up, landing in the sand. Scratched and battered, he ran away into the darkness.

Now in Marib, he was stranded, unsure how to keep going. His arm was painfully swollen from an insect bite. He wouldn't be able to work until it was better. The only food he could find was rice and fetid meat scraps left over from restaurants.

Using the AP's phone, he called his mother for the first time since the horrific calls under torture at Las Anoud.

"Pray for me, mama," he said, choking back tears.

"I know you are tired and in pain. Take care of yourself," she told him.

Was it worth all this to reach Saudi Arabia, he was asked.

He broke down.

"What if I return empty-handed after my mother sold the one piece of land we have?" he said. "I can't enter the village or show my face to my mother without money."

THE KINGDOM

North of Marib, migrants cross into Houthi territory at Hazm, a run-down town divided down the middle between the rebels and anti-Houthi fighters. It's a 3-mile (5-kilometer) no-man's land where sniper fire and shelling are rampant.

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Once across, it is another 120 miles (200 kilometers) north to the Saudi border.

Eissa walked that final stretch, a risk because the militiamen have a deal with migrant smugglers: Those who go by car are allowed through; those on foot are arrested.

"Walking in the mountains and the valleys and hiding from the police," Eissa said in an audio message to the AP.

He traversed tiny valleys winding through mountains along the border to the crossing points of Al Thabit or Souq al-Raqo.

Souq al-Raqo is a lawless place, a center for drug and weapons trafficking run by Ethiopian smugglers. Even local security forces are afraid to go there. Cross-border shelling exchanges and airstrikes have killed dozens, including migrants; Saudi border guards sometimes shoot others.

Eissa slipped across the Saudi border on Aug. 10. It had been 39 days since he had left home in Ethiopia.

After walking another 100 miles, he reached the major town of Khamis Mushayit. First, he prayed at a mosque. Some Saudis there asked if he wanted work. They got him a job watering trees on a farm.

"Peace, mercy, and blessings of God," he said in one of his last audio messages to the AP. "I am fine, thank God. I am in Saudi."

To see the full photo essay on the migrants' journey, [click here](#).

To see a photo essay, "Portraits of Ethiopian girls, women on the march to Saudi," [click here](#).

Digital producers Nat Castañeda and Peter Hamlin contributed to this report.

## Transgender woman poised to make Argentine soccer history

By **DEBORA REY** Associated Press

BUENOS AIRES, Argentina (AP) — Dozens of trophies, balls and cups sit on two worn, wooden shelves in the small home in a Buenos Aires suburb of Mara Gómez, who is poised to become the first transgender woman to play professional soccer in Argentina.

Tall and athletic, Gómez looks at the mementos from her arduous journey in soccer and life, and smiles. "When I started I was so bad. I'd kick the ball at the goal and it would go anywhere."

Gómez spent years playing in local women's leagues in Buenos Aires province before being signed recently by Villa San Carlos in the first division. Now the 22-year-old forward is awaiting the Argentine Soccer Federation's decision whether to authorize the signing in a soccer-mad country that has produced some of the world's greatest stars, from Lionel Messi to Maradona.

Besides soccer fame, Argentina has also become a regional leader in transgender rights. In 2012, it gave people the freedom to change their legal and physical gender without having to undergo judicial, psychiatric and medical procedures.

The federation's decision on Gómez could come in days, and in the run-up her cellphone pings constantly with messages from people reaching out to her. While many support her bid to play professional soccer, others contend it is unfair to the non-transgender women in the league.

"The rights of transgender athletes and the social demands to integrate them into competitions challenge and seriously threaten the rights of women in sports," said Juan Manuel Herbella, a former soccer player who is a sports doctor. "Athletes who were born men, if they maintain their base conditions, start with an enormous advantage."

Juan Cruz Vitale, the Villa San Carlos coach, rejects the idea that Gómez would have an unfair advantage.

The coach said she caught his eye with her speed and her scoring in two straight tournaments. But, he said, "If we talk of strength, I have at least five or six girls who are stronger than her. On that side I don't see that there is an advantage."

Amid the controversy, Gómez recalls how at age 10 she began to ask questions. "I realized that I wanted to be a woman because I liked men and I wanted them to see me in another way."

She said at 13 she told her mother, Caroline, that she was going to lose her only son. She told her: "I want to be a woman and if you don't accept it, I am going to leave home."

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Though her mother accepted her, Gómez said she was tormented by discrimination after assuming the gender she identifies with and was on the brink of taking her own life. Then, she found soccer. She started playing in a vacant lot in front of her house next to her neighbors.

"I used it as a therapy — me trying to accept myself," she told The Associated Press in the house in the suburb of La Plata she shares with her mother and four younger sisters. "There was a mound of emotions that were making me psychologically unwell. I realized that when I play soccer this mound disappeared."

On her journey she says she has suffered discrimination and complaints about her participation.

One of her worst days came during a lightning tournament. "They put me on defense but I didn't know how to play well. I put a goal in my own net. When the first half ended I found out the other team had complained that I shouldn't play because I put them at a disadvantage. They considered my sexuality a disadvantage for them even though I was playing so poorly."

Gómez learned to live with the insults from fans and the complaints when at age 18, backed by the law, she got her new identity card.

"Now I had the identity that I saw myself as having. This gave me the confidence to be who I am," said Gómez, who has a soccer ball tattooed on her leg and keeps her long hair tied back when she plays.

The requests for interviews she has been getting recently have forced her to alter her routine of soccer training and working shifts as a manicurist and hair-straightener, which she does to make a living while studying nursing.

Villa San Carlos is in last place in the current first division tournament and is fighting to not descend a division.

Argentina's soccer federation has no regulations about transgender athletes, so doubt remains about what it will say amid the debate over whether transgender women should play in professional women's leagues.

The federation declined AP requests to comment on Gómez's case.

"On the field, you can have speed and strength, but that doesn't help you if you don't know how to play football," Gómez said. "I always hold up the example of Messi ... He measures 1.6 meters (5 foot, 7 inches) and is the best player in the world."

She models her play on that of Darío Benedetto, formerly with Argentina's Boca Juniors and now with France's Olympique de Marseille, and Florencia Bonsegundo, who plays with Valencia in Spain.

Some specialists have said that a higher level of testosterone in some transgender women gives them greater muscular power and an advantage in women's leagues.

The soccer federation's decision will take into considerations the rules set out by the International Olympic Committee for transgender athletes. In the case of male-to-female transgender athletes they will need to demonstrate that their testosterone level has been below a certain cutoff point for at least one year before their first competition.

Gómez said she dreams of playing with Boca Juniors, her favorite team, and on the Argentine national team. She says she also hopes she serves as an inspiration for other transgender people who in spite of recent advances still suffer violence and discrimination.

"We have to continue changing society so we are seen as people," she said.

## Barr swipes at Trump: Tweets make it 'impossible' to do job

By MICHAEL BALSAMO and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Attorney General William Barr publicly swiped at President Donald Trump on Thursday, declaring the president's tweets about Justice Department prosecutors and open cases "make it impossible for me to do my job."

Barr made the comment during an interview with ABC News just days after his Justice Department overruled its own prosecutors — who had recommended in a court filing that Trump's longtime ally and confidant Roger Stone be sentenced to 7 to 9 years in prison — and took the extraordinary step of lowering the amount of prison time it would seek. The department didn't offer an amended number.

Barr himself has been under fire for the reversal. Still, it was a highly unusual move for a member of

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the Cabinet to criticize the president — especially a Trump loyalist who shares the president's views on expansive executive powers. Thursday's comment served as a defense of his own integrity — an effort to salvage his own reputation and that of the Department of Justice by publicly rebuking the president he's propped up from Day One of his tenure.

The remarks, made so quickly after the decision to back away from the sentencing, suggested Barr was aware the reversal had chipped away at the department's historic reputation for independence from political sway. But he stopped short of acknowledging wrongdoing by anyone.

White House press secretary Stephanie Grisham said Trump "wasn't bothered by the comments at all and he has the right, just like any American citizen, to publicly offer his opinions." She added, "The President has full faith and confidence in Attorney General Barr to do his job and uphold the law."

But Trump has a low tolerance for criticism, especially public criticism, from his allies and often fires back in kind. And the tempered White House response raised questions of whether Barr's comments were coordinated with the White House.

Barr said Trump's tweets created perception problems for the department that called into question its independence, but he denied there was any order from Trump and said Trump's tweets did not factor into the decision.

Barr joined a roster of high level aides who have publicly criticized Trump, though the rest left the job first. Former National Security Adviser John Bolton is to publish a book next month detailing his time in the White House including criticism of Trump actions such as his decision to withhold military assistance while seeking a political favor from Ukraine. Former Chief of Staff John Kelly, who has largely kept a low profile since leaving the White House, has grown more open about his unflattering assessments of the president.

Earlier this week, Trump applauded Barr on Twitter for the decision to reverse the sentencing recommendation, writing: "Congratulations to Attorney General Bill Barr for taking charge of a case that was totally out of control and perhaps should not have even been brought."

The department insisted the decision to undo the sentencing recommendation was made Monday night — before Trump blasted the recommendation on Twitter as "very horrible and unfair"— and prosecutors had not spoken to the White House about it. The about-face prompted the four attorneys who prosecuted Stone to quit the case. One left the Justice Department altogether.

"I'm happy to say that, in fact, the president has never asked me to do anything in a criminal case," Barr said in the ABC interview. "However, to have public statements and tweets made about the department, about our people ... about cases pending in the department, and about judges before whom we have cases, make it impossible for me to do my job and to assure the courts and the prosecutors in the department that we're doing our work with integrity."

National security adviser Robert O'Brien told reporters Thursday evening at the White House that Trump tweets to bypass the mainstream press and speak directly to the American people.

"It's just a different method of communicating with the American people and the president has every right to weigh in," O'Brien said. "He's got First Amendment rights, even though he's president. And he's got a right to weigh in with his opinions on the big issues of the day and I think he's going to continue to do that."

Stone was convicted in November of tampering with a witness and obstructing the House investigation into whether the Trump campaign coordinated with Russia to tip the 2016 election. He's scheduled to be sentenced next week.

Barr said he was "of course" prepared to deal with any ramifications from the president for his comments. Administration officials said senior White House aides were not informed of the contents of Barr's interview before it aired.

"As I said during my confirmation, I came in to serve as attorney general. I am responsible for everything that happens in the department, but the thing I have most responsibility for are the issues that are brought to me for decision," Barr said in the interview.

It is extremely rare for Justice Department leaders to reverse the decision of prosecutors on a sentenc-

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ing recommendation, particularly after that recommendation has been submitted to the court. The actual sentencing is up to the judge.

Meanwhile, the Chief Judge of the D.C. District Court, Beryl A. Howell, also did something unusual: She issued a statement Thursday on the firestorm around the sentencing.

"The Judges of this court base their sentencing decisions on careful consideration of the actual record in the case before them; the applicable sentencing guidelines and statutory factors; the submissions of the parties, the probation office and victims; and their own judgment and experience," she wrote. "Public criticism or pressure is not a factor."

"What they did to Roger Stone was a disgrace," Trump said Thursday during an interview with Geraldo Rivera on Cleveland's Newsradio WTAM.

He said of the prosecutors who resigned in protest: "I don't think they quit the case. ... I don't think they quit for moral reasons. I think they got caught in the act by me."

"Now what am I going to do, sit back and let a man go to jail maybe for nine years when murderers aren't going to jail? You have some of the most serious horrible rapists and everything else. They don't go to jail for nine years," Trump said.

Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Lindsay Graham said in a statement that Barr "has my complete confidence" and "is the right man at the right time to reform the department and stand up for the Rule of Law."

Earlier this week, Graham said, and Barr later confirmed, that Justice was accepting information that Trump's personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani is gathering in Ukraine about Democratic presidential contender Joe Biden and his son.

In the ABC interview, Barr said of the president, "If he were to say go investigate somebody because — and you sense it's because they're a political opponent — then the attorney general shouldn't carry that out, wouldn't carry that out."

Democrats decried the Justice Department's reversal on Stone and called for immediate investigations. Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer called for the Justice Department's inspector general to step in. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said Thursday that Barr had "stooped to such levels" and that "the American people deserve better."

Barr has been a steady ally of the president's since he returned to the top post at the Justice Department last year. He cleared the president of obstruction of justice even when special counsel Robert Mueller had pointedly declined to do so. He declared that the FBI's Russia investigation, which resulted in charges against Stone, had been based on a "bogus narrative."

Barr also appointed U.S. Attorney John Durham to lead a criminal inquiry into the origins of the Russia investigation, including examining what led the U.S. to open a counterintelligence probe into the Trump campaign and the roles that various countries played.

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Associated Press writers Eric Tucker, Deb Riechmann and Lisa Mascaro contributed to this report.

## Limbaugh draws bipartisan criticism for Buttigieg remarks

By ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Conservative talk show host Rush Limbaugh drew bipartisan criticism Thursday for saying the country won't elect Pete Buttigieg president because he's been "kissing his husband" on stage after debates.

Limbaugh's comments came eight days after President Donald Trump awarded him the nation's top civilian honor during the State of the Union address. Trump said Limbaugh inspires millions of people daily and thanked him for "decades of tireless devotion to our country."

Limbaugh, a staunch Trump ally who recently announced he has advanced lung cancer, made the remarks on his nationally syndicated radio show. Buttigieg has finished in the top two in Democrats' first two presidential contests in Iowa and New Hampshire.



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"They're saying, 'OK, how's this going to look?'" Limbaugh said Wednesday, imagining Democrats' thinking. "Thirty-seven-year-old gay guy kissing his husband on stage, next to Mr. Man, Donald Trump."

Buttigieg didn't directly address Limbaugh's remarks. But at a town hall in Las Vegas Thursday night, he said, "I'm proud of my marriage I'm proud of my husband."

Limbaugh's remarks were the latest tendentious turn in a career in which he's won an adoring audience among millions of conservative listeners, but condemnation from others for comments considered racist, sexist and offensive.

Buttigieg, 38, is the former mayor of South Bend, Indiana, and has been married to his husband, Chasten, since 2018. Buttigieg was a U.S. Navy intelligence officer in Afghanistan, is a Harvard graduate and was a Rhodes scholar at Oxford University in England.

Limbaugh said he envisioned Democrats concluding that "despite all the great wokeness and despite all the great ground that's been covered, that America's still not ready to elect a gay guy kissing his husband on the debate stage president."

Former Vice President Joe Biden, who is challenging Buttigieg for the Democratic presidential nomination, assailed Limbaugh on ABC's "The View."

"I mean, my God," said Biden, who called it "part of the depravity of this administration." He added, "Pete and I are competitors, but this guy has honor, he has courage, he is smart as hell."

Trump, asked if Americans would vote for a gay man to be president, responded, "I think so."

Still, Trump added: "I think there would be some that wouldn't. I wouldn't be among that group, to be honest with you." Trump spoke during an interview with Geraldo Rivera on Cleveland's Newsradio WTAM.

Some Capitol Hill Republicans said they disagreed with Limbaugh's remark, while others demurred.

"I'm just going to leave all that alone," said conservative Sen. Marsha Blackburn, R-Tenn., who said she'd not heard the comment. Sen. Joni Ernst, R-Iowa, facing reelection this fall, also declined to comment.

"It's a miscalculation as to where the country is at," Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., a strong Trump supporter, told The Associated Press about Limbaugh's words. "I think the country is not going to disqualify somebody because of their sexual orientation."

Asked if Limbaugh should retain the Presidential Medal of Freedom, which Trump bestowed last week during his State of the Union address, Graham said, "Well, my God. Free speech still exists."

Sen. Rob Portman, R-Ohio, said of Limbaugh, "He may disagree, as I do, with their policy positions, but the question is what their qualifications are, not other issues." Portman announced his support for gay marriage in 2013 as he revealed that his son Will is gay.

Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., a moderate who is retiring in January, initially said he wasn't familiar with Limbaugh's remarks and declined to comment. His spokesman later emailed an Alexander statement that said: "There may be reasons not to vote for Mayor Buttigieg, but that's not one of them. This is a tolerant country."

A Buttigieg campaign spokesman declined to comment.

But the candidate has addressed criticism over his sexuality before. During a Des Moines, Iowa, rally in 2019, an audience member asked what he should tell his friends who say America isn't ready for a gay president. Buttigieg replied, "Tell your friends I said 'hi.'"

The former mayor has also framed his sexuality in religious terms.

"If me being gay was a choice, it was a choice that was made far, far above my pay grade," Buttigieg said. "If you've got a problem with who I am, your problem is not with me. Your quarrel, sir, is with my creator."

According to government websites, the Presidential Medal of Freedom is for "an especially meritorious contribution to the security or national interests of the United States, world peace, cultural or other significant public or private endeavors."

Past winners have included Mother Teresa, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and Frank Sinatra. Under Trump, the award's recipients have included golfer Tiger Woods, supply side economist Arthur Laffer and Edwin Meese III, who was a top aide to President Ronald Reagan.

The 69-year-old Limbaugh also said some Democrats may believe they should "get a gay guy kissing

his husband on stage, ram it down Trump's throat and beat him in the general election. Really? Having fun envisioning that."

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

## Trump's story about veteran's comeback was not quite true

By BERNARD CONDON Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Tony Rankins, a formerly homeless, drug-addicted Army veteran, got a standing ovation at the State of the Union after President Donald Trump described how he turned his life around thanks to a construction job at a company using the administration's "Opportunity Zone" tax breaks targeting poor neighborhoods.

But that's not completely true.

Rankins, who indeed moved out of his car and into an apartment since landing a job refurbishing a Nashville hotel two years ago, doesn't work at a site taking advantage of the breaks and never has done so. In fact, he started that job four months before the Treasury Department published its final list of neighborhoods eligible for the breaks. And the hotel where he worked couldn't benefit even now because it's an area that didn't make the cut.

In an interview with The Associated Press, Rankins said he always considered the job that launched him on his new life two years ago to be in an Opportunity Zone and was honored to be invited by the White House to the State of the Union, with a prime seat in the balcony next to Ivanka Trump.

"After struggling with drug addiction, Tony lost his job, his house and his family. He was homeless. But then Tony found a construction company that invests in Opportunity Zones," the president said in his Feb. 4 speech. "He is now a top tradesman, drug-free, reunited with his family."

Days later, Trump doubled down on the Rankins story in a speech on his economic initiatives in Charlotte, North Carolina, and invited him up to say a few words.

"First of all, I would like to thank the president for signing this bill, because without it I wouldn't be standing here before you right now," Rankins said.

Trump also praised Rankins' employer, R Investments, for "working to help 200 people rise out of homelessness every year by investing in opportunity zones."

That is also not quite true.

CEO Travis Steffens said he has hired hundreds of homeless to work at the 400 buildings the company has owned over the years, taking advantage of various tax breaks. But when it comes to Trump's Opportunity Zone breaks, he said, the company has only one building tapping the program now, a warehouse in Cincinnati where no one seems to be working, homeless or otherwise.

"We've not really worked there," Rankins said, "but we've stored things over there."

Steffens suggested that when Trump said R Investments was helping 200 people rise out of homelessness he was referring to the number the company hopes to teach construction skills to at the warehouse once it has been converted to a training academy.

The White House did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Rankins, an ex-felon and veteran who served in Afghanistan and suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, now works at another R Investments building in Cincinnati that is in an Opportunity Zone but has not used the tax breaks. He will start working at the warehouse next month, his first job at a site using the breaks.

That hasn't stopped the Trump administration and its allies from taking credit for Rankins' turnaround.

Rankins "made an incredible comeback thanks to Opportunity Zone investments!" the White House tweeted. The official GOP twitter account said the story shows "how an opportunity zone in Cincinnati has given him a second chance." Ivanka Trump told her Twitter followers: "Through grit and perseverance, he secured a job (created in an opportunity zone) and is now thriving."

The Opportunity Zone program passed as part of Trump's 2017 tax overhaul offers investors big savings

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in capital gains taxes if they put money into nearly 8,000 poor neighborhoods designated by the Treasury Department as neglected and needing the help. Trump has touted the program in several speeches as an example of how he is helping struggling African-Americans.

Critics say that too many neighborhoods getting the break were already gentrifying and that investors are likely to pour even more money into them, bypassing the poor, black communities that the program is partly intended to help. But backers note that the final rules governing the program were only released in December and say it is too early to judge.

R Investments CEO Steffens said he was contacted by the Trump administration after speaking on an opportunity zone panel last year.

Steffens said he has provided jobs to a lot of homeless people over the last 14 years, as many as 100 in a single year, inspired by his parents' example when he was growing up.

"My dad would give his last dollar to make sure that a mom and her kids had a meal," Steffens said. He "taught me at young age, there's no such thing as a self-made man."

After the Cincinnati training academy, Steffens said he plans to open ones in the New Orleans and Miami areas, too. He said he is also close to closing a deal to buy a hotel in Charlotte in an Opportunity Zone. He said he also hopes to find land in Opportunity Zones to place hundreds of "tiny homes" that students will build as part of their training.

Steffens said he is not used to being in the national spotlight — he was invited to the State of the Union and the Charlotte speech, too — and is worried that it now can turn against him and the homeless he is trying to help.

"The publicity that this has given us is going to help us do more in the areas that we are in. And so I want to be sure that something is not painting the wrong picture, because if it that hurts us, it's going to hurt these individuals in these areas," he said. "We need the country to get behind what we're doing."

As it turns out, there is a tax break that Steffens has tapped to employ homeless and others like Rankins. The Work Opportunity Tax Credit gives as much as \$10,000 in tax credits to employers who hire homeless and others with difficulty finding jobs.

That benefit was passed in 1996 when Bill Clinton was president.

The Rankins story was one of several State of the Union introductions that appeared to be overtures to black voters, and the second to be shown to be less than truthful.

Trump dramatically announced that a Philadelphia fourth-grader, Janiyah Davis, would be getting a scholarship that would allow her to transfer from a "failing government" school to a charter school of her choice. But The Philadelphia Inquirer reported that she had already been attending a charter school for months and that students there don't have to pay tuition.

As for Rankins, his feelings for the president haven't changed just because he may not be the ideal Opportunity Zone hero.

"I'm not really a political person," he said, "but yes, he would have my vote."

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Contact AP's global investigative team at [Investigative@ap.org](mailto:Investigative@ap.org)

## Trump says he might keep others from listening in on calls

By DEB RIECHMANN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump said Thursday that he might end the long-running practice of letting other administration officials listen in on presidential calls with foreign leaders. That's after Trump's impeachment was triggered by his July phone call with the president of Ukraine.

"I may end the practice entirely," Trump told Geraldo Rivera in a radio interview that aired Thursday. Records experts said that was a bad idea, for multiple reasons.

Trump also offered new insights into his feelings about being impeached, saying it made him think about the "dark" days when Richard Nixon resigned over the Watergate scandal before his own likely impeachment.

"Well, it's a terrible thing and, you know, I think of Nixon more than anybody else and what that dark

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period was in our country and the whole thing with the tapes and the horror show," Trump said. "It was dark and went on for a long time, and I watched it."

He said he often passes portraits of past presidents that hang in the White House.

"The portrait of Richard Nixon — I don't know. It's a little bit of a different feeling than I get from looking at the other portraits of presidents," he said. "I got impeached for no reason whatsoever — totally partisan."

Trump was impeached over his decision to hold up military aid to Ukraine. House Democrats allege that Trump abused his power by asking Ukraine to announce investigations of political rival Joe Biden and other Democrats in exchange for releasing the aid. House Democrats also charged Trump with obstruction of Congress for refusing to turn over documents and provide witnesses.

The president's impeachment stemmed from his July 25 call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and White House staffers listened in the call.

As is standard practice in any administration, the staffers, working in the secure, soundproof Situation Room in the West Wing basement, chronicled the conversation. National Security Council personnel then prepared a memorandum about the call, which serves as an official record.

Robert O'Brien, Trump's national security adviser, said the president can conduct whatever phone calls he wants without other people being on the line.

"We can certainly comply with the Presidential Records Act and serve the president in however he'd like to have his conversations with foreign leaders," O'Brien told reporters Thursday evening outside the White House. But he said he thinks Trump likes having Vice President Mike Pence, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo or O'Brien listening to the conversations.

"I think generally the president is happy if he's got some of his aides with him when he's making those calls. ... So, we'll see how that plays out," O'Brien said.

The White House clamped down on the distribution of those memos earlier in the Trump administration after information about the president's calls with other heads of state, including Mexico's, were leaked to the media, according to two people familiar with how the distribution became more limited.

Larry Pfeiffer, a 30-year U.S. intelligence veteran who managed the Situation Room during the Obama years, said his predecessor told him that the White House had stopped taping presidential calls in the 1970s after Nixon recorded 3,700 hours of conversations. Transcripts of those conversations were used by Watergate investigators and during the impeachment hearings that followed.

"The long-standing practice is something meant to help and protect the president. It allows the president and the national security adviser to track any agreements made on the call and to refute quickly and accurately any incorrect claims about the call made by the foreign side," Pfeiffer said, adding that it allows White House staff members to follow up and implement the president's policy.

Pfeiffer, who now directs the Michael V. Hayden Center for Intelligence, Policy, and International Security at George Mason University, said the memoranda of foreign leader calls also fulfill important historical record-keeping requirements.

"By stopping the practice, the president only shoots himself in the foot," he said. "And one can only surmise that the president therefore has something to hide from his own staff and bureaucracy."

Steven Aftergood, who directs the Federation of American Scientists' Project on Government Secrecy, also said that the president has the power to limit access to his conversations. But Aftergood said it's a "bad idea."

"The president requires the expertise and advice of his senior officials, and they require access to these calls in order to do their job," Aftergood said. "Secrecy here becomes self-defeating."

## Trump bringing back trusted aide Hope Hicks to White House

By JILL COLVIN and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Hope Hicks, one of President Donald Trump's most trusted and longest-serving aides, is returning to the White House as the president works to surround himself with loyalists as his reelection campaign moves into high gear.

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Hicks, a former White House communications director who was one of Trump's original 2016 campaign staffers, is expected to serve as counselor to the president, working with presidential son-in-law and senior adviser Jared Kushner, according to a person familiar with the situation who spoke on condition of anonymity before the announcement had been made public. She left the White House in 2018 and moved to California to work as a top executive at the Fox Corporation, though she and Trump remained in touch.

Hicks's move comes just one week after Trump was acquitted by the Senate on impeachment charges. Since then, he's been on a tear to clear his administration of those he sees as insufficiently loyal, including ousting staffers at the national security council and state department and pulling the nomination of a top treasury department pick who had overseen cases involving Trump's former aides as U.S. Attorney. More departures are expected in the coming days, including at the shrinking foreign policy arm of the White House, where Trump's national security adviser has been pushing for months to cull staff.

At the same time, Trump has been working to surround himself with longtime aides he believes he can trust as he heads into what is expected to be a bruising general election campaign to remain in the White House.

In addition to Hicks, Trump recently brought back John McEntee, another longtime staffer who began on the 2016 campaign as an intern and rose to become one of Trump's closest staffers, with an office adjacent to the Oval Office. McEntee had served as Trump's personal aide until he was forced out of the White House in 2018 on the orders of former chief of staff John Kelly over issues with his security clearance.

McEntee has now been tapped to lead the White House Presidential Personnel Office, an influential posting that coordinates the screening and hiring of thousands of federal government workers. As part of that mission, he is expected to work to ensure that only those who believe in Trump's mission are offered jobs.

"This is bringing back Ringo and John and Paul and George," said Jason Miller, senior communications adviser to Trump's 2016 campaign, referring to the members of the super group "The Beatles."

"This is putting the band back together for what is probably going to be the most consequential and important concert of their lives," he said, noting that the people being brought back into the fold "are people that understand Trump as a person, who understand President Trump's priorities, who he likes personally" and who "re going to spend every waking moment of their lives trying to help him."

In her new role, Hicks will not be part of the White House communications department, but will work closely with Kushner and White House political director Brian Jack "in a number of strategic areas," according to a White House official. She is expected to start early next month, though details were still being worked out Thursday.

Known for her loyalty and low public profile, Hicks was part of the small inner circle that traveled the country with Trump aboard his private jet as he waged his unlikely campaign for the Republican nomination and then the presidency in 2015 and 2016. She was often described as someone who was especially deft at reading the president's moods and helping others navigate his instincts.

Trump never wanted Hicks to leave the White House, which she chose to do as she was called to testify before lawmakers and the special counsel's office during the Russia investigation. And she and the president remained in regular touch while she was at Fox, with the president trying to convince her to return to the White House since nearly the day she left, according to one of the people. The president's sales pitch, the person said, intensified in recent months amid impeachment.

The news of her decision was praised publicly by top administration officials, including Stephanie Grisham, the White House press secretary who also serves as the current White House communications director.

"I have worked with Hope for almost six years and can say without hesitation she is one of the most talented and savvy individuals I have come across," Grisham said in a statement. "She has always impressed me with her quiet confidence, loyalty and expertise, and I am beyond thrilled to welcome Hope back to the White House."

"There is no one more devoted to implementing President Trump's agenda than Hope Hicks," Kushner added. "We are excited to have her back on the team."

Even before Trump's acquittal, his national security adviser Robert O'Brien had been working to shrink the ranks at the National Security Council, where Alexander Vindman, the director for European Affairs,

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had worked before he was escorted out of the White House last week.

O'Brien said the streamlining will be completed by the of the week, with about 70 fewer staffers than the 115 to 120 staffers when he started the job in September.

Meanwhile, the conservative Newsmax TV announced Thursday that Trump's first press secretary, Sean Spicer, will be hosting a political talk show that will air weeknights at 6 p.m. from Washington. "Spicer & Co." will debut on March 3.

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Associated Press writers Jonathan Lemire and Deb Riechmann contributed to this report.

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

## Fear, boredom, adventure fill each day on quarantined ship

By FOSTER KLUG Associated Press

YOKOHAMA, Japan (AP) — Fear. Surprising moments of levity. Soul-crushing boredom.

Life on the Diamond Princess, the cruise ship quarantined in a Japanese port with scores of cases of a new virus, means experiencing all these things, according to interviews by The Associated Press with passengers and a growing stream of tweets and YouTube videos.

At times there's been an almost festive atmosphere, as when locals on Jet Skis buzzed the ship, shouting greetings. Other times, there is deep worry as new cases are confirmed, pushing the total to 218 — the largest cluster of infections outside China. Five of those patients have severe symptoms and are in intensive care or on artificial respirators, Japan's health ministry said.

Others have reported surprisingly mild symptoms, including one Australian woman who described the initial terror of being whisked to a hospital while covered in protective plastic.

The days pass with petty frustrations and inconveniences — cramped rooms, dirty sheets, boring food — and difficult work for the hundreds of crew members.

With the number of illnesses increasing, there's also a nagging doubt about whether this kind of quarantine works. Some experts question if keeping some 3,500 passengers and crew in such close quarters might spread the viral disease, recently named COVID-19.

With another week or more of quarantine to come, the AP looks inside the vacation cruise that's gone seriously off course:

### THE GOOD

Even during the quarantine, it can seem like Cheryl and Paul Molesky are still on vacation.

The couple from Syracuse, New York, can be seen in their YouTube videos lounging, often in plush bathrobes, on their balcony, enjoying the sweeping views of a glittering, sun-streaked ocean and, on occasion, snow-capped Mount Fuji.

"We try to have an upbeat presentation and make sure that our attitude comes across that, we're not hurt, we're not in pain, ... we're actually just enjoying ourselves," Paul Molesky, a 78-year-old potter, said in an interview. "It's been very nice."

There was the time a man came to the docks in a Spider-Man costume and played music for an hour and a half to the delight of the passengers.

And the time, early in the quarantine, when eight people on Jet Skis cruised up, yelling out "Welcome!" and playing music. The passengers clapped and waved from their balconies.

The ship, which has 17 decks, has upped its internet service, and Cheryl Molesky spends several hours each day answering emails and texts and editing their YouTube videos.

"Now that we're here in quarantine we're getting so much attention. We never get that much attention at home," the 59-year-old retired art and media teacher said.

### THE BORED

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Elsewhere on the ship, a Japanese man in his 30s who refused to give his name because of privacy concerns said he spends his days taking photos of each meal and posting them anonymously on Twitter. "All I can do is to wait and tweet," he said.

The ship has a sushi restaurant, Japanese style bath and theater, but passengers are now mostly confined to their rooms. Many cabins — spread across decks with names such as Aloha, Dolphin and Emerald — are as small as, if not smaller, than many hotel rooms.

More affordable rooms are not much wider than a double bed and don't have much seating space aside from a desk chair, according to pictures posted on the ship's website. The cheapest ones don't even have windows. Many balcony rooms are around 222 square feet or less, the website said. A lot of the interior rooms, which feature large mirrors in place of a window, are only 158 to 162 square feet.

Guests must often change their own sheets, clean their bathrooms and do their own laundry because contact with the crew has been limited.

The days often revolve around food service. Knocking on four doors at once, an elaborate delivery choreography takes place: one masked and gloved crew member hands out the plates, another the silverware, while another checks off names and room numbers.

The boat has added more movies and TV channels to try to help with the boredom. People without balconies are allowed to walk on the deck for about an hour each day, as long as they keep 6 feet (2 meters) apart. Passengers chat and wave to each other from their balconies.

Passenger Matthew Smith has been compiling regular food reviews on Twitter. In one, he noted that he feels, while sitting in his room between meals, just like his cat "waiting for her daily serving of canned food. Is it time? Is it time?"

For the Japanese man on the ship, the food is one of the biggest reasons he wants to leave. "I miss Japanese food."

## THE SCARED

In a recent video posted on Twitter, a group of men wearing Diamond Princess jackets, masks and what appear to be the uniforms of kitchen workers stood before a camera.

"We are scared. We appeal to the Indian government and the United Nations to help us, segregate us urgently," a man identified as crew member Binay Kumar Sarkar said after removing his mask. "We should be rescued immediately and reunited with our families before it is too late."

Some crew members who've tested positive for the virus are restaurant, bar or housekeeping staff who most likely had contact with passengers until Feb. 5 when the first test results were released and restaurants and bars were closed.

"Until the quarantine started, everything was business as usual, and everyone was freely moving around on board, so there are various possibilities of infection during that time," said Kazuho Taguchi, director of global health cooperation at the health ministry.

Crew members still share rooms, as the number of cabins for them is limited, Taguchi said.

One crew member, though, said he had been isolated in his own 6-by-10-foot (1.8-by-3-meter) cabin on the third deck near sea level for two days after he reported a sore throat.

"Everyone on the ship is scared. Many people are falling sick, and now the crew's getting sick too," he said, declining to give his name because workers have been told not to post anything about the situation on the ship to social media.

Japan's health minister, Katsunobu Kato, said Thursday the government would begin allowing passengers 80 or older who test negative for the virus to leave the ship and serve out the remainder of their quarantine onshore. Those with chronic health problems or assigned cabins without windows would be given priority, he said.

Authorities in Japan say isolating people on board is the way to prevent the disease's spread; other experts say the measure could create more infection.

"More and more people are getting infected by people still in the incubation period or without symptoms

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while they are trapped on the ship, which is not good for disease prevention," Reiji Goto, a physician at the department of infectious diseases at Daiyukai General Hospital in Ichinomiya, told TBS television on Tuesday.

A hospital — not a ship — is the best place to keep people quarantined, according to Tara Smith, a professor who researches infectious diseases at Kent State University's College of Public Health. The Diamond Princess may have already had environmental contamination when the quarantine began, which puts passengers and crew at risk of further transmission.

"I think this was done without a lot of thought to consequences of ongoing transmission within the ship and the mental health of the passengers," Smith said.

For some, the fear might be worse than the virus.

On Thursday, an Australian mother and daughter wearing face masks described being taken off the ship and to a hospital after the daughter tested positive for the virus.

"They put me in, like, a wheelchair, sort of, and put like a plastic — almost like a bubble around it — and they were just wheeling me everywhere," Bianca D'Silva, a 20-year-old law student, told Australia's Nine Network television.

Bianca and her mother, Suzanne, said they were both briefly ill, but feel fine now.

"Honestly, it just felt like your everyday cold. Like, I feel absolutely fine now, physically," Bianca said. "I had a bit of headache before and just a slight fever but that's about it, honestly."

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Associated Press journalists Emily Wang and Mari Yamaguchi in Tokyo, Rod McGuirk in Australia and Vineeta Deepak and Emily Schmall in New Delhi contributed to this report.

## 2 Ohio State football players plead not guilty to rape

By **ANDREW WELSH-HUGGINS** and **MITCH STACY** Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — Two former Ohio State football players pleaded not guilty Thursday to charges that they held a woman against her will and raped her this month.

Defensive backs Amir Riep and Jahsen Wint — who were kicked off the team Wednesday after they were charged — made an initial appearance in Franklin County Municipal Court in Columbus, and their respective attorneys entered pleas of not guilty.

Judge Cynthia Ebner set bond at \$100,000 for Riep and \$75,000 for Wint and ordered that the men not have contact with the accuser or each other. They also were ordered not to discuss her on social media.

The case now will go to a grand jury, which will decide whether the men should be indicted.

Wint's attorney, Sam Shamansky, declared his client innocent, pointing out that Columbus police waited seven days to arrest him.

"Were my client some stone-cold rapist, kidnapper, he wouldn't have been on the street for seven minutes, not to mention seven days," Shamansky said. "This case is so full of reasonable doubt it's beyond belief. The reality is, my kid's innocent."

The woman told police that on Feb. 4 she started having consensual sex with Riep before Wint came into the room and both forced her into sex.

After several minutes, they stopped and Riep told the woman that she needed to say what happened was "consensual on a video recording while laughing at her," according to police. Riep then told the woman she needed to shower before he drove her back to her home.

Officials said in court that police have the video recording.

Shamansky, one of the highest-profile defense lawyers in Columbus, said Wint cooperated fully with police before Shamansky began representing him and has expressed his willingness to take a lie-detector test.

"I'm curious whether his alleged victim is willing to do the same. I'm guessing the answer is no," Shamansky said.

Riep's attorney, Karl Schneider, said the young man is cooperating with investigators and is "sad and depressed" about Ohio State's decision to release him.



Riep and Wint both were rising seniors and expected to compete for playing time in Ohio State's defensive backfield.

In dismissing the players from the team, Ohio State coach Ryan Day said in a statement that "it is clear they did not live up to our standards and my expectations."

The program has mostly avoided major off-the-field trouble as Day begins his second year at the helm. Last season, All-American defensive end Chase Young was suspended for two games after accepting a personal loan in violation of NCAA rules.

## **Cole starts Yankees tenure with questions about Astros**

**By MARK DIDTLER Associated Press**

TAMPA, Fla. (AP) — On the day of his first formal workout with the New York Yankees, Gerrit Cole talked about what he did and did not know about the Houston Astros.

Houston was disciplined by Major League Baseball for breaking rules by using a video camera to steal signs during its run to the 2017 title and again during the 2018 season, the first after Cole was acquired from Pittsburgh.

New York lost to Houston in the AL Championship Series in both 2017 and against last year. Cole is ready to discuss the Astros if his new teammates inquire.

"I'll just give them an honest answer, which is I had no idea of any of it going on and I didn't see any of it," Cole said. "So, I really don't think I have much to apologize for."

Yankees manager Aaron Boone doesn't think it's necessary to talk with Cole about the lingering issue.

"He was there after a lot of the specific things that we know were going on, so no, I don't view it as anything we've got to address with Gerrit," Boone said.

Signed to a \$324 million, nine-year contract, a record for a pitcher, Cole worked out Thursday on a back field with other members of New York's staff. Wearing pinstripe pants and a dark batting practice shirt with No. 45 on the back, drills included fielding grounders on the mound and throwing in the outfield.

"I've been chomping at the bit quite a bit," Cole said at a post workout news conference. "I'm just excited to get down here. Just thrilled for his new adventure. A lot of good vibes, a lot of excitement and having a good time."

Cole is focusing on this year, when the Yankees hope to reach the World Series for the first time since winning the 2009 title. New York won 103 games and the AL East last year, swept Minnesota in the Division Series, then got knocked out by Cole's Astros.

Cole hopes to win a title with the team he rooted for growing up, a club he spurned when he was first drafted in 2008 to attend UCLA.

"I love it," Cole said. "From a player's perspective, it really doesn't get much more simple than that. It's the dream to go out there every day and try to win every single time. There are a lot of moving parts and there's a lot of people that pour a lot of time into just simplifying that one theme: We need to win a world championship."

More AP MLB: <https://apnews.com/MLB> and [https://twitter.com/AP\\_Sports](https://twitter.com/AP_Sports)

## **Sudan seeks to end terror designation in USS Cole settlement**

**By NOHA ELHENAWY Associated Press**

CAIRO (AP) — Sudan's transitional government said Thursday it has reached a settlement with families of the victims of the 2000 attack on the USS Cole in Yemen, a key step in having the U.S. remove Sudan from its list of state sponsors of terrorism so it can rejoin the international community after years of exclusion.

Copies of the agreements obtained by The Associated Press show that \$70 million will be split among families of 17 people killed, as well as 15 sailors who were injured and two of their spouses. In the agreement, Sudan makes no admission of wrongdoing.

The announcement was the latest in a series of efforts by the interim government to close the book on

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former President Omar al-Bashir, whose three decades of iron-fisted rule was brought to an end in popular protests last year.

Al-Bashir's Islamist government promoted policies that ensured Sudan remained a pariah to much of the world. The International Criminal Court has accused him of genocide for his leadership of a scorched-earth campaign in the southern area of Darfur in response to a rebel insurgency there. Up to 300,000 people were killed and 2.7 million were driven from their homes.

But in recent weeks the transitional government has sought to erase remnants of al-Bashir's rule so it can heal the country's battered economy. On Tuesday, it said it would hand him and other Sudanese officials over to the court in The Hague to be tried for war crimes.

Settling the case of the USS Cole would be another big move in Sudan's rehabilitation.

On Oct. 12, 2000, two suicide bombers in a boat detonated their explosives alongside the USS Cole as the U.S. Navy destroyer was refueling in the Yemeni port of Aden. The blast killed 17 sailors and wounded more than three dozen others.

Sudan was accused of providing support to al-Qaida, which claimed responsibility for the attack. Under al-Bashir, the country was designated by Washington as a "state sponsor of terror" for hosting the group's leader, Osama bin Laden, in the early years of his militant movement.

Observers and Sudanese officials have said the settlement was among the last hurdles faced by Sudan on its path to being removed from the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism.

Sudan's Justice Ministry said the agreement was signed with the victims' families on Feb. 7.

Faisal Saleh, Sudan's information minister and interim government spokesman, told the AP that Justice Minister Nasr-Eddin Abdul-Bari had traveled to Washington to sign the deal.

He said the figures could not be disclosed because the Sudanese government is still in negotiations to reach settlements with families of victims of the 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. More than 200 people were killed and more than 1,000 were wounded in those attacks.

But Adam Hall, a lawyer for the families of the victims, said it would provide \$70 million to be split among families of the 17 people killed as well as 15 sailors who were injured in the attack. That money is on top of \$14 million that was awarded in an earlier case.

He said \$30.6 million is dedicated to the families of the dead and \$39.4 million goes to those who were injured.

He and the families have been pursuing the case for more than 15 years, Hall said.

"Sudan was finally of the view that it was willing to resolve these cases," he said.

"There is a huge difference between getting a judgment you may never collect and actually receiving a substantial amount of money. ... The fact that we are actually collecting just makes me so happy for the families," he said.

The new Sudanese rulers maintain they are not responsible for the attack on the USS Cole and that they had negotiated the deal out of their desire "to resolve old terror claims inherited from the ousted regime" of al-Bashir.

The families of the dead and the wounded sailors had sued the Sudanese government in U.S. courts, demanding compensation for the country's role in supporting al-Qaida.

In 2012, a federal judge issued a judgment of nearly \$315 million against Sudan, but the U.S. Supreme Court overturned that ruling in March 2019 on the grounds that Sudan had not been properly notified of the lawsuit.

The United States has been looking at whether to remove Sudan's terror designation "for quite some time," U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told reporters Thursday, but he didn't offer any indication over when such a change to its status could take place.

Pompeo said that the settlement for USS Cole victims was one of the outstanding issues.

Saleh also told the AP that the U.S. administration has set the overhaul of the country's security apparatus as another condition to remove Sudan from the terror list.

"The Americans believe Sudan's support for terror was carried out through its security apparatus," Saleh

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said. "So they want to be assured that there has been a radical change" in the way it operates.

Daniel Benjamin, a former State Department counterterrorism coordinator and ambassador-at-large, described the state sponsor of terrorism designation as "kind of a diplomatic nuclear bomb" because of the draconian sanctions that accompany it, the fact that it is seldom used and the difficulties in getting off it.

"The politics of getting off the list are always incredibly complicated and draw in issues that don't directly have anything to do with terrorism," said Benjamin, who now directs the John Sloan Dickey Center for International Understanding at Dartmouth College.

Reaching settlements in the cases involving the attacks on the USS Cole and the embassies in Kenya and Tanzania were made more difficult because Sudan's strapped for cash. Initial claims had been in the billions, Saleh said, and Sudan's interim government had "inherited an empty treasury."

He said he hoped the international community would be sympathetic.

"We expect the United States and the world to understand and to be supportive instead of imposing more obstacles," he said.

As Sudan seeks to present a new face to the world, its political situation remains fragile.

Sudan's main challenge is its shaky economy, which for decades has been distorted by heavy government subsidies. To implement social programs, the government needs loans from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, but cannot receive them as long as the country remains on the terror list.

The transitional leaders fear that if they don't immediately improve living conditions for its people, many of whom live below the poverty line, they risk more protests, which initially started after staple food prices spiked. And the country's military, which remain the country's power brokers, have made it clear they will not tolerate any more unrest.

After the military's takeover last year, pro-democracy protesters were subjected to a brutal crackdown. On June 3, Sudan's security forces violently swept away a protest camp near the military headquarters in the capital, Khartoum. Protest leaders estimated that at least 128 people had been killed.

The government has also not said when the 76-year-old al-Bashir, who remains jailed in Khartoum, will be handed over to the International Criminal Court in The Hague. He faces three counts of genocide, five counts of crimes against humanity and two counts of war crimes for his alleged role in leading the deadly onslaught on civilians in response to the insurgency in Darfur.

The indictments were issued in 2009 and 2010, marking the first time the global court had charged a suspect with genocide.

Al-Bashir's lawyer, Mohammed al-Hassan, warned that handing him over would have "dire political and security repercussions" for Sudan and that the matter "will not happen easily."

In another major policy shift, the interim leaders met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who announced that Israel and Sudan would normalize relations after decades of enmity.

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Associated Press writers Matthew Barakat in Falls Church, Virginia; Matthew Lee in Istanbul; and Eric Tucker in Washington contributed.

## UN says 140,000 displaced in 3 days amid Syrian offensive

By SARAH EL DEEB Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Over 140,000 Syrians have been displaced in the last three days alone by violence in the country's northwest, bringing the total of those uprooted in a Syrian government offensive against the last opposition stronghold to over 800,000, the United Nations said Thursday.

The U.N. said at least 60% of the more than 800,000 displaced since Dec. 1 are children. The humanitarian crisis in the already overcrowded opposition-held enclave is compounded by freezing weather conditions, and existing severe needs.

The government offensive, backed by Russia, has intensified and expanded to include southern and eastern Idlib province as well as southern and western Aleppo, an area home to an estimated 4 million people. Most have already been displaced from other parts of Syria because of the ongoing conflict.

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The humanitarian situation for people in northwest Syria is "at the most critical points," the U.N. said, adding that the massive scale of human displacement over such a short period of time has increased needs exponentially.

David Swanson, U.N. regional spokesperson for the crisis in Syria, said more resources, including funding, are immediately needed to save lives and alleviate suffering, predicting the 800,000 figure will rise in the coming days as the government offensive continues.

"This level of displacement couldn't come at a worse time as more and more people are squeezed into an increasingly smaller area of land with little more than the clothes on their back," he said, describing people fleeing in the middle of the night to avoid detection in temperatures below zero.

"The crisis is deepening by the minute, but the international community remains indifferent," Swanson added.

Government forces, with Russian support, have focused their offensive on areas along a strategic highway that runs through opposition territory and connects the country's south to the north. The M5 highway, now secured by Syrian troops, had been out of government control since 2012 and accessing it was part of a now failed 2018 cease-fire agreement. Calls for a cease-fire have failed to stop the violence.

On Thursday, government troops continued to advance through the Aleppo countryside to secure their hold on the highway. Most of the villages and towns that sit alongside the highway are now empty, while hundreds of thousands are squeezing into displacement camps, open fields and tents to move away from the front lines.

The U.N. said 550,000 of the displaced are living in Idlib towns and villages already packed with displaced people. Another 250,000 have moved to northern Aleppo in areas administered by Turkey and allied Syrian groups.

Turkey, a sponsor of the cease-fire and a backer of the opposition, has sent thousands of troops into the area to stall the advances, sparking rare direct confrontations with Syrian troops.

The Syrian war, now in its ninth year, has pulled in international players including the U.S., Russia and Turkey. Russia has supported the Syrian government troops while the U.S. has led an international coalition fighting Islamic State group militants.

Also on Thursday, the U.S. military acknowledged its troops fired on and killed a Syrian combatant when government supporters attacked an American convoy in northeastern Syria a day earlier.

The clash Wednesday was a rare direct confrontation between a Syrian pro-government group and U.S. troops deployed in the increasingly crowded terrain near the border with Iraq and Turkey.

A convoy of U.S. armored vehicles drove into a government-controlled area and was attacked by pro-government supporters, including armed men who fired at the soldiers and pelted them with stones and Molotov cocktails.

Spokesman for the U.S.-led coalition Col. Myles Caggins said the person killed was a combatant. He said the U.S. soldiers had come under fire and responded in self-defense. Syrian government media maintained the person killed was a civilian.

The U.S. maintains hundreds of troops in the area. In recent weeks, and following a Turkish invasion of villages and towns along its borders, the area has been swarming with Russian, Syrian government and Turkish troops. They are deployed in part to maintain the peace but also in the latest tug over territorial control in Syria's conflict.

Caggins said the patrol was planned, and the route passed through a pro-government area. The convoy of U.S. armored vehicles passed through a Syrian military checkpoint, but government militia were also present.

The U.S. maintains lines of communication with Russia, Damascus's ally, to avoid such confrontations. It wasn't clear if the route was deconflicted.

Videos showed government supporters attacking the vehicles and two men firing small arms at the convoy, which was flying the U.S. flag. Some residents pelted the convoy with stones, while another dumped a bucket full of dirt on the back of one vehicle.

U.S. soldiers were seen standing in the middle of the melee, trying to disperse the crowd. One U.S. vehicle was stuck in the dirt, apparently having veered into a ditch, while another had a flat tire.

"Despite U.S. troops' repeated de-escalation efforts, local militia members attacked U.S. troops with small arms weapons from multiple firing positions," Caggins said. "Coalition forces always have the right to self-defense and fired back at armed aggressors killing one adult male combatant."

## **NASA's space snowman reveals secrets: few craters, no water**

**By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer**

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — NASA's space snowman is revealing fresh secrets from its home far beyond Pluto.

More than a year after its close encounter with the snowman-shaped object, the New Horizons spacecraft is still sending back data from more than 4 billion miles (6.4 billion kilometers) away.

"The data rate is painfully slow from so far away," said Will Grundy of Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff, Arizona, one of the lead authors.

Astronomers reported Thursday that this pristine, primordial cosmic body now called Arrokoth — the most distant object ever explored — is relatively smooth with far fewer craters than expected. It's also entirely ultrared, or highly reflective, which is commonplace in the faraway Twilight Zone of our solar system known as the Kuiper Belt.

Grundy said in an email that to the human eye, Arrokoth would look less red and more dark brown, sort of like molasses. The reddish color is indicative of organic molecules.

While frozen methane is present, no water has yet been found on the body, which is an estimated 22 miles (36 kilometers) long tip to tip. At a news conference Thursday in Seattle, New Horizons' chief scientist Alan Stern of Southwest Research Institute said its size was roughly that of the city.

As for the snowman shape, it's not nearly as flat on the backside as previously thought. Neither the small nor big sphere is fully round, but far from the flatter pancake shape scientists reported a year ago. The research team likened the somewhat flattened spherical forms to the shape of M&Ms.

No rings or satellites have been found. The light cratering suggests Arrokoth dates back to the formation of the solar system 4.5 billion years ago. It likely was created by a slow, gentle merger between two separate objects that possibly were an orbiting pair. The resulting fused body is considered a contact binary.

This kind of slow-motion hookup likely arose from collapsing clouds in the solar nebula, as opposed to intense collisions theorized to form these planetesimals, or little orbiting bodies.

New Horizons flew past Arrokoth on Jan. 1, 2019, more than three years after the spacecraft visited Pluto. Originally nicknamed Ultima Thule, the object received its official name in November; Arrokoth means sky in the language of the Native American Powhatan people.

Launched in 2006, the spacecraft is now 316 million miles (509 million kilometers) beyond Arrokoth. The research team is looking for other potential targets to investigate. Powerful ground telescopes still under construction will help survey this part of the sky.

Emerging technology will enable scientists to develop a mission that could put a spacecraft in orbit around Pluto, 3 billion miles (5 billion kilometers) away, according to Stern. After a few years, that same spacecraft could be sent even deeper into the Kuiper Belt to check out other dwarf planets and objects, he said.

The New Horizons scientists reported their latest findings at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, as well as in three separate papers in the journal *Science*.

David Jewitt of the University of California, Los Angeles, who was not involved in the studies, said a flyby mission like New Horizons, where encounters last just a few days, is hardly ideal.

"For future missions, we need to be able to send spacecraft to the Kuiper Belt and keep them there" in orbit around objects, Jewitt wrote in a companion piece in *Science*. That would allow "these intriguing bodies to be studied in stunning geological and geophysical detail," he noted.

Institute's Department of Science Education. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

## **Puerto Rico online scam targeted more than \$4M amid crisis**

**By DÁNICA COTO Associated Press**

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico (AP) — An online scam that targeted Puerto Rican agencies attempted to steal more than \$4 million, police said Thursday, deepening concerns about the management of local government finances during an economic crisis.

Authorities have frozen at least \$2.9 million, said an official who was not authorized to comment on the case and requested anonymity. The government has not said how much money was seized by the hacker.

The scam began when someone hacked into the computer of a finance worker at the island's Employee Retirement System in December, said José Ayala, director of the fraud unit within the bank robbery division. The hacker then posed as the female employee and sent emails to various government agencies alleging a change in bank accounts, he told The Associated Press.

Two agencies fell victim to the scam in recent months: Puerto Rico's Industrial Development Company sent \$63,000 in December and more than \$2.6 million in January, while the island's Tourism Company sent \$1.5 million in January to fraudulent accounts on the U.S. mainland, he said.

Puerto Rico government officials realized what had happened when the finance worker at the Employee Retirement System called the agencies and said she had not received any payments and officials responded they had already sent them.

"That's when they call us and all hell breaks loose," Ayala said.

El Nuevo Dia, a Puerto Rico daily newspaper, had reported the \$1.5 million payment that the tourism company had made. The other payment became public late Wednesday through a police report.

Ayala said no other government agencies have reported a loss as a result of the scam. He said the FBI is investigating how the computer at the Employee Retirement System got hacked.

On Thursday, legislators demanded a probe as government officials declined to provide further information, citing an ongoing investigation.

"The government of Puerto Rico is in a serious fiscal crisis. It doesn't have enough money to fulfill its obligations," said Puerto Rico Rep. Ramón Luis Cruz, who filed legislation seeking an investigation. "It's truly absurd and unsustainable to have such a shallow and vague explanation."

Incidents in which hackers spoof or compromise an email account from a legitimate person or company are common in the public and private sector, said Meredith Ward, policy and research director at the National Association of State Chief Information Officers.

"It can be compared to knocking on the door," she said. "Happens every day, but entry isn't always gained."

Around the same time the Puerto Rico incident occurred last month, a school district in Manor, Texas, reported an email phishing scam that resulted in the loss of \$2.3 million. Meanwhile, officials in Griffin, Georgia, reported a loss of more than \$800,000 last year after receiving an email requesting an account change.

More than 23,700 business email compromises, as such scams are known, were reported on the U.S. mainland last year, with total adjusted losses of more than \$1.7 billion, according to the FBI. A special FBI team said it helped recover more than \$300 million stolen in that type of scheme last year.

Manuel Laboy, executive director of Puerto Rico's Industrial Development Company, told the AP that the agency is trying to recover the money.

Tourism spokeswoman Yolanda Rosaly referred questions to the governor, whose office said local and federal authorities were working on the case and that it cannot provide comment until the investigation is complete.

Puerto Rican Rep. Jesús Manuel Ortiz said the lack of information is unacceptable.

"There are a lot of questions that have not been answered," he said. "The government has to explain what happened."

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## Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, Feb. 14, the 45th day of 2020. There are 321 days left in the year. This is Valentine's Day.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Feb. 14, 2018, a gunman identified as a former student opened fire with a semi-automatic rifle at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School near Fort Lauderdale, Florida, killing 17 people in the nation's deadliest school shooting since the attack in Newtown, Connecticut, more than five years earlier.

On this date:

In 1859, Oregon was admitted to the Union as the 33rd state.

In 1876, inventors Alexander Graham Bell and Elisha Gray applied separately for patents related to the telephone. (The U.S. Supreme Court eventually ruled Bell the rightful inventor.)

In 1912, Arizona became the 48th state of the Union as President William Howard Taft signed a proclamation.

In 1913, labor leader Jimmy Hoffa was born in Brazil, Ind.; college football coach Woody Hayes was born in Clifton, Ohio; sports broadcaster Mel Allen was born in Birmingham, Ala.

In 1929, the "St. Valentine's Day Massacre" took place in a Chicago garage as seven rivals of Al Capone's gang were gunned down.

In 1945, during World War II, British and Canadian forces reached the Rhine River in Germany.

In 1949, Israel's Knesset convened for the first time.

In 1967, Aretha Franklin recorded her cover of Otis Redding's "Respect" at Atlantic Records in New York.

In 1979, Adolph Dubs, the U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, was kidnapped in Kabul by Muslim extremists and killed in a shootout between his abductors and police.

In 1984, 6-year-old Stormie Jones became the world's first heart-liver transplant recipient when the surgery was performed at Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh (she lived until November, 1990).

In 1985, Cable News Network reporter Jeremy Levin, held hostage by extremists in Lebanon, escaped from his captors.

In 2013, double-amputee and Olympic sprinter Oscar Pistorius shot and killed his girlfriend, Reeva Steenkamp, at his home in Pretoria, South Africa; he was later convicted of murder and is serving a 13-year prison term. American Airlines and US Airways announced an \$11 billion merger that turned American into the world's biggest airline.

Ten years ago: The Americans broke through the Nordic combined barrier at Vancouver as Johnny Spillane won the silver, the first U.S. Olympic medal in the sport dominated since its inception by the Europeans (Jason Lamy Chappuis of France won the gold). Jamie McMurray won the Daytona 500. The Eastern Conference edged the West 141-139 in the NBA All-Star game in Arlington, Texas. Larry Ellison's space-age trimaran completed a two-race sweep in the 33rd America's Cup. Death claimed best-selling British author Dick Francis at age 89 and Doug Fieger, leader of the power pop band The Knack, at age 57.

Five years ago: A Danish gunman attacked a free-speech seminar and a synagogue in Copenhagen, killing two people; the shooter was later slain by a special police team. Actor Louis Jourdan (LOO'-wee zhor-DAN'), 93, died in Beverly Hills, California. Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Philip Levine, 87, died in Fresno, California.

One year ago: William Barr was sworn in for his second stint as the nation's attorney general; he succeeded Jeff Sessions, who'd been pushed out of office by President Donald Trump after Trump denounced Sessions' decision to recuse himself from the Russia investigation. Amazon abruptly dropped plans for a big new headquarters in New York after politicians and activists objected to the nearly \$3 billion in incentives that had been promised to the company. European aviation giant Airbus said it would stop making its superjumbo A380 in 2021 after struggling to sell the plane, the world's biggest passenger jet.

Today's Birthdays: TV personality Hugh Downs is 99. Actor Andrew Prine is 84. Country singer Razyzy Bailey is 81. Former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg is 78. Jazz musician Maceo Parker is 77. Movie director Alan Parker is 76. Journalist Carl Bernstein is 76. Former Sen. Judd Gregg, R-N.H., is 73. TV

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personality Pat O'Brien is 72. Magician Teller (Penn and Teller) is 72. Cajun singer-musician Michael Doucet (doo-SAY') (Beausoleil) is 69. Actor Ken Wahl is 63. Opera singer Renee Fleming is 61. Actress Meg Tilly is 60. Pro Football Hall of Famer Jim Kelly is 60. Singer-producer Dwayne Wiggins is 59. Actress Sakina Jaffey is 58. Actor Enrico Colantoni is 57. Actor Zach Galligan is 56. Actor Valente Rodriguez is 56. Rock musician Ricky Wolking (The Nixons) is 54. Former tennis player Manuela Maleeva is 53. Actor Simon Pegg is 50. Rock musician Kevin Baldes (Lit) is 48. Rock singer Rob Thomas (Matchbox Twenty) is 48. Former NFL quarterback Drew Bledsoe is 48. Actress Danai Gurira is 42. Actor Matt Barr is 36. Actress Stephanie Leonidas is 36. Actor Jake Lacy is 34. Actress Tiffany Thornton is 34. Actor Brett Dier is 30. Actor Freddie Highmore is 28.

Thought for Today: "We are effectively destroying ourselves by violence masquerading as love." — R.D. Laing, Scottish psychiatrist (1927-1989).

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