

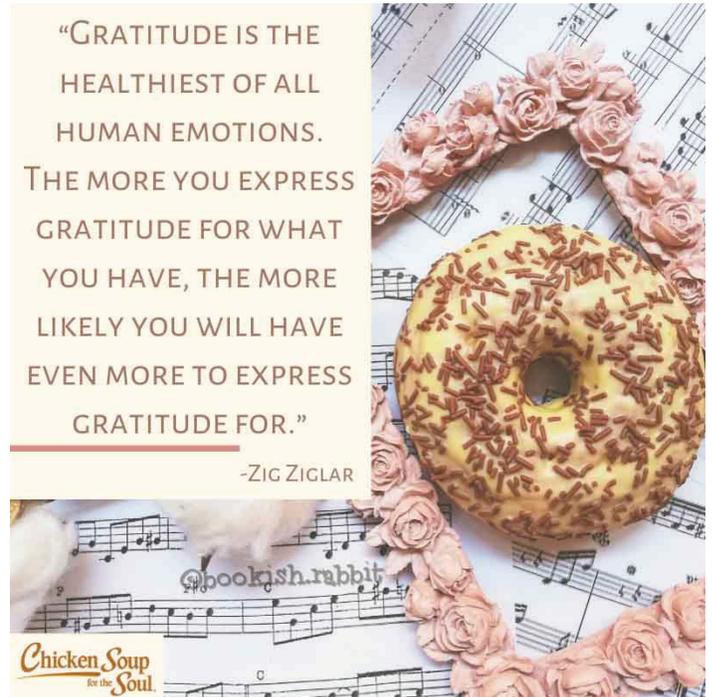
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"GRATITUDE IS THE HEALTHIEST OF ALL HUMAN EMOTIONS. THE MORE YOU EXPRESS GRATITUDE FOR WHAT YOU HAVE, THE MORE LIKELY YOU WILL HAVE EVEN MORE TO EXPRESS GRATITUDE FOR."

-ZIG ZIGLAR



It's Basketball Action on GDILIVE.COM



**Mobridge-
Pollock
Tigers**

VS



Groton Area Tigers

- 2:00 p.m. **Girls JV** - sponsored by Ronayne Law Office
- 3:15 p.m.: **Boys JV** - sponsored by Olson Development
- 4:30 p.m.: **Girls Varsity Game** and
- 6:00 p.m.: **Boys Varsity Game**

Sponsored by Allied Climate Professionals
Blocker Construction, Groton Dairy Queen
Jark Real Estate, John Sieh Agency
Milbrandt Enterprises, Tyson DeHoet Trucking

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

© 2019 Groton Daily Independent

Varsity squads post wins over Warner, DeHoet joins 1000 point club



Coach Brian Dolan hands Brodyn DeHoet the 1000th point ball after the game. DeHoet scored his 1000th career point with 41 seconds left in the game with a free throw. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

It was a double-header night at the Warner Gym as both varsity squads posted wins over Warner in basketball action. The girls won their game, 46-29 and the boys won their game, 48-38.

The junior varsity teams split their games with the girls winning their game and the boys losing a close one.

All of the games were carried live on GDILIVE.COM. The girls JV game was sponsored by Larry and Kathy Harry, the boys JV game was sponsored by Julie and Carson Larson, the girls varsity was sponsored by Locke Electric and the South Dakota Army National Guard and the boys varsity was sponsored by the Aberdeen Chrysler Center. Make sure you tell these sponsors "Thank You" and if they have business, make sure you patronize them as well.

Brodyn DeHoet scored his 1000th career point with 41 seconds left in the game with a free throw and it was free throws that gave the Tigers the win over Warner. In the fourth quarter, Groton Area made 12 of 15 free throws while making only one of eight shots. Warner made more field goals in the fourth quarter than it did the first three quarters. Coach Brian Dolan said in a GDILIVE.COM interview after the game that the boys got a little tired in the fourth quarter after holding Warner to just 21 points in the first three quarters. The Monarchs were just six points short of doubling its score in the fourth quarter.

The Tigers came out firing on all cylinders to take a 15-2 lead at the end of the first quarter. Groton Area made six of 10 field goals for 60 percent and Warner was one of 12 for 8 percent. The Tigers had a 12-point run in the first half and that was followed up by a nine-point run by Warner as the Tigers led at a half time, 23-13. In the second quarter, Groton Area made three of eight field goals for 38 percent and Warner was two of eight for 25 percent. The Monarchs also had six turnovers in the second quarter.

Both teams struggled to score baskets in the third quarter with Groton Area making three of 12 for 25 percent and Warner four of 14 for 29 percent. It was 32-21 in favor of the Tigers at the end of the third quarter.

Brodyn DeHoet had a double-double night with 17 points, 16 rebounds, three steals and one block shot. Jonathan Doeden fouled out with 3:18 left in the game and had 10 points, two rebounds, two assists, two steals, three blocked shots and a dunk. Kaden Kurtz had 10 points, three rebounds, two assists and two steals. Cade Guthmiller added six points, had two rebounds, one assist, one steal and a blocked shot. Tristan Traphagen had three points, five rebounds and three blocked shots. Jayden Zak had two points



Coach Brian Dolan and Brodyn DeHoet. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

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The team gathered around for a photo with Brodyn DeHoet who got his 1000th point Friday night in Warner. (Photo by Julianna Kosel)

and two rebounds. Isaac Smith had a steal and Chandler Larson had a rebound.

Groton Area made 11 of 24 field goals for 46 percent, two of 12 three-pointers for 17 percent, made 20 of 27 free throws for 74 percent off of Warner's 22 team fouls, had 31 rebounds, 10 turnovers, five assists, nine steals, 13 fouls and a season high eight blocked shots.

Warner was led by Landon Leidholt with 14 points followed by Peyton Jung with eight, Alex Braun had seven, Spencer Ketterling five and Ben Fischbach had four points. The Monarchs were 15 of 50 in field goals shooting for 30 percent and made seven of 13 free throws off of Groton Area's 16 team fouls. Warner had 10 turnovers.

The Lady Tigers had a 26-2 run in the first half to cruise to a 46-29 win. The lead changed hands four times and the game was tied once in the early part of the game before Groton Area went on its run. The Tigers trailed at the end of the first quarter, 11-7, but took the lead at half time, 23-14, and led, 38-18, at the end of the third quarter.

Alyssa Thaler made three-three-points and led the Tigers in scoring with 13 points, she had three rebounds, three assists and two steals. Brooke Gengerke had 10 points, seven rebounds and three assists. Gracie Traphagen had nine points and one rebound. Allyssa Locke had four points, four rebounds, three assists and three steals. Kaycie Hawkins had four fourth-quarter points, had four rebounds and three steals. Trista Keith had two points, six rebounds and two assists. Maddie Bjerke had two points Madeline Fliehs had two points, four rebounds, one assist and two steals.

Groton Area made 12 of 30 field goals for 40 percent, made six of 18 three-pointers for 33 percent, made four of 11 free throws for 36 percent off of Warner's nine team fouls, had 29 rebounds, 13 turnovers, 12 assists and 10 steals.

Kamryn Anderson led the Monarchs with 10 points while Jennifer Aman had nine, Kendyl Anderson had six, Summer Scepaniak had two and Peyton Fischer and Savannah Green each had one free throw. The

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Monarchs made 10 of 45 shots for 22 percent and was five of 10 from the line off of Groton Area's 16 team fouls. Warner had 16 turnovers.

Ten players scored for Groton Area as the Lady Tigers won the junior varsity game, 43-19. Scoring for Groton Area: Nathalia Garcia 7 Maddie Bjerke 6, Carly Guthmiller 5, Emma Schinkel 5, Shallyn Foertsch 5, Aspen Johnson 4, Trista Keith 4, Anna Fjeldheim 3, Madeline Fliehs 2 and Marlee Tollifson 2.

Hailee Lesnar led the Monarchs with 10 points while Jennifer Aman had four, Morgan Haselhorst three and Lauren Marcuson two.

Chandler Larson made a three-pointer with 15 seconds left to tie the game in the boys junior varsity game, but the Monarchs would score the winning basket with three seconds left pull out a 36-34 win. Lane Tietz led the Tigers with 15 points while Chandler Larson had eight, Tristan Traphagen six and Isaac Smith had five. Traphagen, who had three blocked shots in the varsity game, also had three blocked shots in the junior varsity game.

Carstyn Vetter led the Monarchs with 11 points while Hunter Cramer had eight, Ty Cramer seven, and Chase Braun and Peyton Jung each had five points

Groton Area made 14 of 36 shots for 39 percent and Warner made 12 of 36 shots for 33 percent. Groton Area did not attempt a free throw. Warner was five of eight from the line for 63 percent. Groton Area had eight turnovers and Warner had 11.

- Paul

Upcoming Events

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

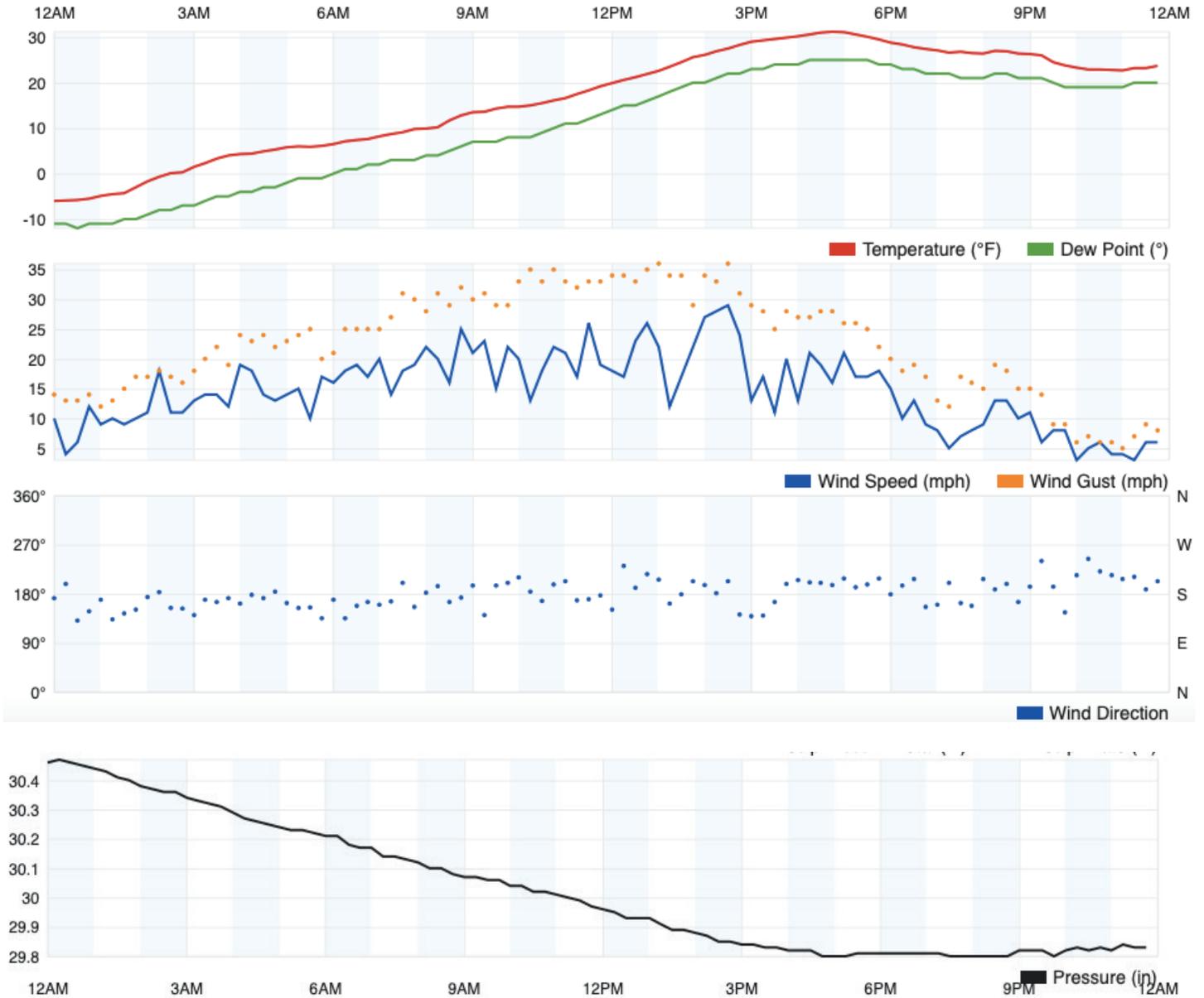
Monday, February 24, 2020

Life Touch pictures at elementary school

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



Partly Sunny

High: 35 °F

Tonight



Mostly Cloudy

Low: 11 °F

Sunday



Cloudy

High: 26 °F

Sunday
Night



Mostly Cloudy

Low: 15 °F

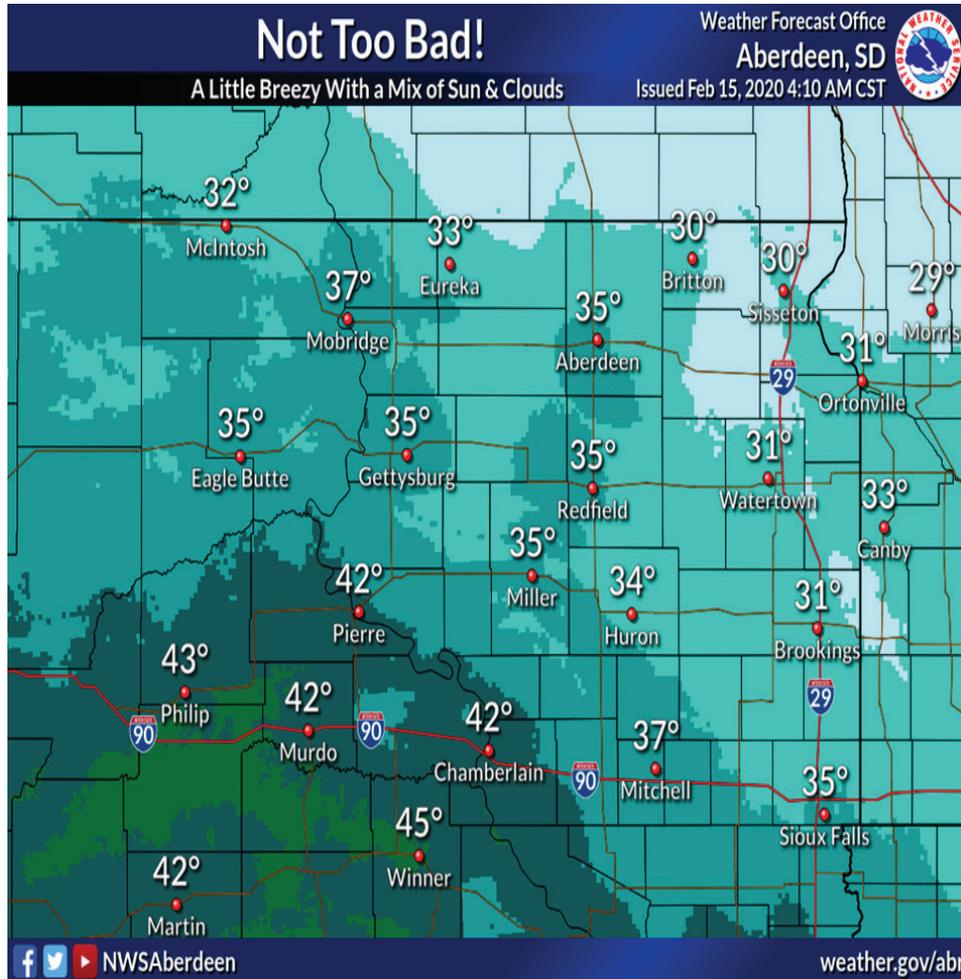
Washington's
Birthday



20%

Slight Chance
Snow then
Mostly Cloudy

High: 24 °F



Temperatures are already around freezing for much of the CWA, and despite a mix of sun and clouds along with breezy conditions, it will be a fairly nice day with readings a few degrees above average. Expect temperatures closer to average for Sunday.

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Today in Weather History

February 15, 1969: Heavy snow, along with winds of 15 to 25 mph caused blowing and drifting snow which closed many roads. The heaviest snow fell in the southeast part of the state, where a foot of snow was reported.

February 15, 1990: Heavy snow developed across southwest South Dakota early on the 15th and moved slowly across the state before ending early on the 16th. A narrow band of 10 to 12 inches accumulated in Central South Dakota from Pierre to near Huron. Lesser amounts of 3 to 6 inches fell north and south of the heavy snow band. Some of the heavier snowfall amounts included, 6 inches at Aberdeen and Sioux Falls, 10 inches Pierre, and 12 inches at Huron.

1982: A "meteorological bomb" exploded in the Atlantic southeast of Newfoundland. The term is used to describe a storm that rapidly intensifies. An intense cyclone off the Atlantic coast capsized a drilling rig killing 84 persons and sank a Soviet freighter resulting in 33 more deaths. The storm produced 80 mph winds that whipped the water into waves fifty feet high.

2000: Amarillo, Texas, set unusual temperature records today. The high of 82 degrees smashed the old daily high of 76 degrees set in 1921. The morning low of 41 degrees broke the old high-low record for the date of 40 degrees, which was also set in 1921.

1895 - A big Gulf snowstorm produced six inches at Brownsville TX and Mobile AL, 15 inches at Galveston TX, and 24 inches of snow at Rayne LA in 24 hours. Snow fell at the very mouth of the Mississippi River. Houston TX received 22 inches of snow, and nine inches blanketed New Orleans LA. (David Ludlum)

1936 - The temperature at Parshall ND plunged to 60 degrees below zero to establish a state record. On the 6th of July that same year the temperature at Steele ND hit 121 degrees, also a state record. (David Ludlum)

1982 - An intense cyclone off the Atlantic coast capsized a drilling rig killing 84 persons, and sank a Soviet freighter resulting in 33 more deaths. The cyclone produced 80 mph winds which whipped the water into waves fifty feet high. (David Ludlum)

1987 - A storm crossing the central U.S. produced severe thunderstorms which spawned tornadoes in Louisiana and Mississippi. Tornadoes injured four persons at Pierre Pass LA, three persons at Tangipahoa LA, two persons at Lexie MS and two persons at Nicholson MS. Thunderstorm winds gusting to 100 mph killed one person south of Sulphur LA. Jackson MS was drenched with 1.5 inches of rain in ten minutes. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Low pressure brought heavy snow to parts of Michigan, with eleven inches reported at Rogers City. A cold front crossing the Northern Rockies produced wind gusts to 74 mph at Livingston MT, and created blizzard conditions in Idaho. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Thirty-seven cities in the southeastern U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date. The afternoon high of 80 degrees at Atlanta GA was a February record. Highs of 79 degrees at Chattanooga TN, 84 degrees at Columbia SC and 85 degrees at New Orleans LA equalled February records. (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - Snow, sleet and freezing rain along an arctic cold front prevailed from the north central U.S. to the Northern Atlantic Coast Region. High winds created near blizzard conditions in southern Wyoming, closing Interstate 80, while up to eleven inches of snow fell across central Minnesota.

1990 - Heavy snow also blanketed the Northern Atlantic Coast States, with ten inches reported at Buffalo NY and Mount Washington NH. Freezing rain over southern New England knocked out electricity to more than 10,000 homes in the western suburbs of Boston MA. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2004 - Up to 11 inches of snow fell in areas south of Nashville, TN, causing power outages and producing hazardous driving conditions. The Weather Doctor

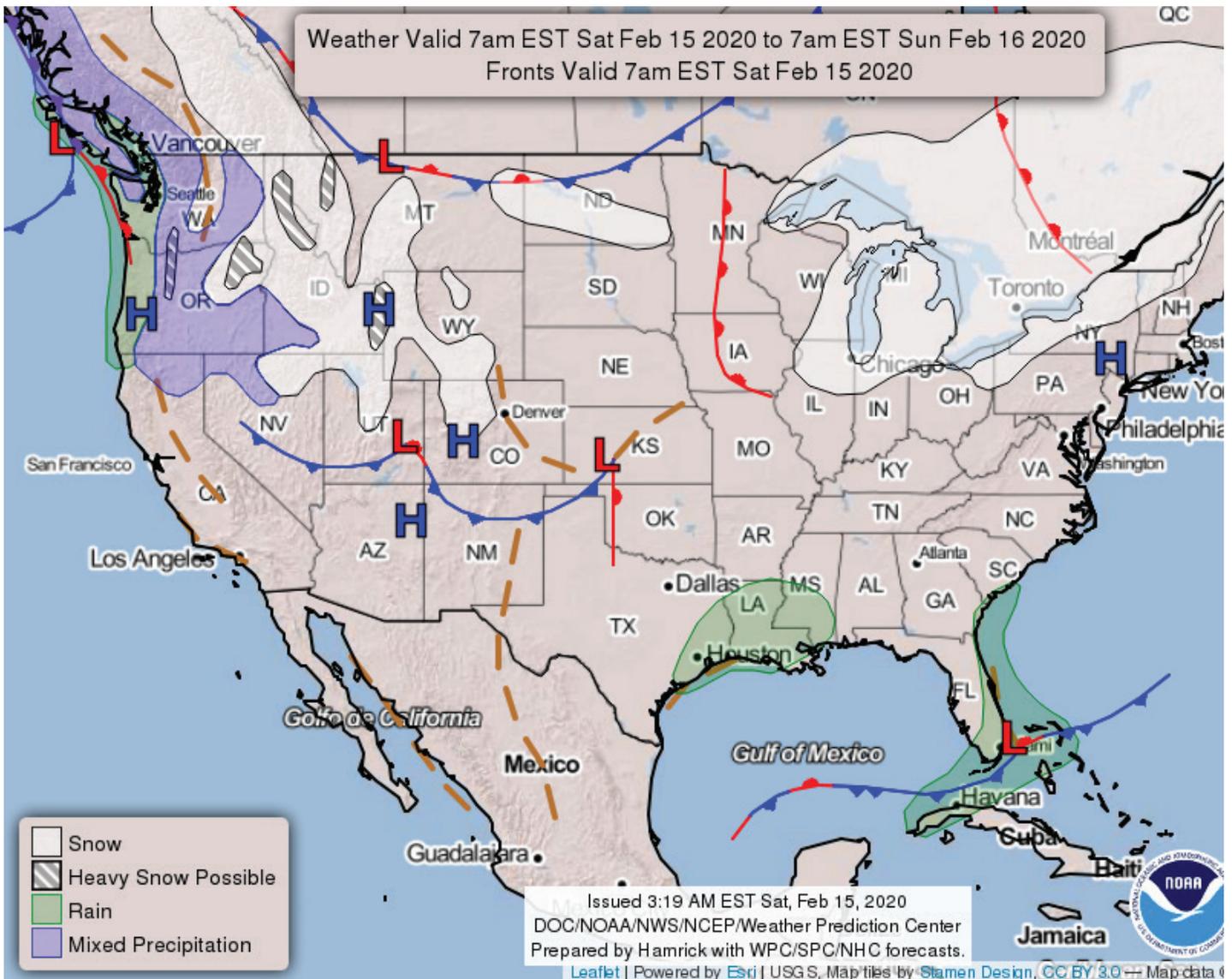
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

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: 65° in 1921
Record Low: -35° in 1939
Average High: 28°F
Average Low: 7°F
Average Precip in Feb.: 0.23
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 0.70
Precip Year to Date: 0.35
Sunset Tonight: 6:00 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:34 a.m.





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

News from the Associated Press

South Dakota couple sentenced to prison after fatal crash

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — A South Dakota couple has been sentenced to federal prison after two of their children died in a vehicle crash on the Rosebud Sioux Reservation.

The Rapid City Journal reports Dakota Horned Eagle, 29, was sentenced to 4 years and three months years in prison after pleading guilty to involuntary manslaughter and causing a serious injury to a minor while operating a motor vehicle under the influence of alcohol.

Ashley Stoneman, 25, was sentenced 1 ½ years in prison Monday after pleading guilty to child abuse.

The charges stem from a July 12, 2019 crash that killed two of the couple's sons, ages 12 and 7.

Stoneman, Horned Eagle and four surviving children received non-life threatening injuries. Authorities said none of the children were restrained in car seats or wearing seat belts.

Horned Eagle told authorities he was highly intoxicated that day and he may have blacked out. Stoneman told authorities she also had been drinking and was holding an infant on her lap. She told authorities she knew that Horned Eagle was intoxicated before they got in the vehicle.

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — These South Dakota lotteries were drawn Friday:

Mega Millions

10-32-48-54-55, Mega Ball: 18, Megaplier: 5

(ten, thirty-two, forty-eight, fifty-four, fifty-five; Mega Ball: eighteen; Megaplier: five)

Estimated jackpot: \$40 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$40 million

Northern's Tanner Berg takes to weight throw

By JACQUE NILES Aberdeen American News

ABERDEEN, S.D. (AP) — Two years ago, Tanner Berg took a quizzical look at the weight throw.

He was a shot put/discus kind of guy from Watertown who had exactly two years of experience to his name, and the hammer throw isn't allowed by South Dakota high school rules, so the indoor event was a mystery to him.

Then, the Northern State University throws coaches began to teach him the art of throwing a heavy ball attached to a short chain with a handle by having him pick up a stick first, and things really got confusing.

And any phantom genie who would have happened upon him then to tell him what he'd be doing now would have been laughed all the way back into his lamp.

But Berg has come a long way since that first day of practice. A junior for the Northern track and field program, he is headed to Albuquerque, New Mexico, this weekend to compete in the indoor national championships.

Not the NCAA national meet, though he's a lock for that one, too. This week, Berg is headed for the USA Track & Field Indoor Championships — the one with all the professionals and some Olympic hopefuls among the competitors. In terms of national meets, it's as big as it gets.

"It's fantastic," said Northern State assistant throws coach Mariah Mougey, who coaches weight throw athletes. "We never know what an athlete is going to do with the weight or the hammer because most athletes have never seen it. I like to test everyone out because you do never know. It's really fun when you have that freshman that it really clicks. From day one with Tanner, you knew he had that connection."

But no one really knew how far that connection would go.

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"If you would have told me my freshman year that in two years I'd be sitting No. 1 in the nation and have some of the top throws ever in (Division II), I would have told you you were out of your mind," Berg told the Aberdeen American News. "Just by how new everything was. I had never even heard of the weight throw. The hammer throw I'd heard about, but I was like, 'How does this even work? It's way foreign to anybody.'"

In other words, Berg was a blank slate, though to hear him talk about it, that was an advantage. Because he hadn't ever touched the implement, he was coachable. Moldable. And he didn't come with bad habits to break.

"Maybe the best thing to come out of it was that I'd never touched it before," Berg said. "I didn't have any bad habits coming in. A lot of people that throw the weight and the hammer, they always have some wear and tear on them, like their back and knees hurt. I came from only throwing for two years in high school, and I hadn't really put a whole lot of stress on my body."

Of course, there's the stick part of the story, which might be confusing to anyone who's not familiar with the Northern State throws program. Stick drills are essentially a method of teaching footwork with which individuals hold sticks away from their body to keep their upper body steady while learning the footwork needed to do turns in the throwing ring.

"It is very confusing," Mougey said. "As a new person, we just give them the weight and they have no idea. There's a lot of very basic fundamentals that we want to teach."

It's not always a stick, she added. Sometimes, it's a kettle ball or a dumbbell. Whatever works to teach the specific movement needed.

Bit by bit, Berg picked it up. And success followed in short order. Berg has spent the past two and a half seasons breaking and re-breaking the Northern State event record, plus nearly every meet record he's ever encountered.

But, Mougey said, there's more to come.

"He's nowhere close to what he can be," she said. "He has so much potential. I really don't think he's there. If you break down his form, technically, there's a lot we can work on. There's endless possibilities."

Now, more than five meters past the original weight throw record when Berg arrived on campus, he's headed to compete with the pros.

"During this year, every meet, I was getting better," Berg said. "(Personal record) every week. And after I had my best one — the 21.5 — I looked on the USA website and it said qualifying was 20 meters. I had surpassed that by quite a bit. I didn't even mention it, but the coaches asked me that same day if I wanted to go to New Mexico, and I was like, 'Oh, that's weird. I was just looking at this. Yeah, that'd be really fun.'"

Berg enters the meet — the weight throw is set for Friday evening — ranked 10th among the 15 declared and accepted entries. Three others qualified but will not compete. Among the field is former Moberg-Pollock standout Daniel Roberts, who is ranked second.

Though the two have not met, they do communicate often. Both Roberts' success and aspirations — he's aiming for the Tokyo Olympics this summer — and Berg's own success have sparked a desire for Berg he didn't even know was possible.

"I'm really excited for the hammer this year," Berg said. "I've learned a lot in the preseason and throughout the summer, just gaining all this knowledge about the throw. Learning new things and getting them technically sound. I think we open up the end of March for outdoor, and I'm really excited to see how that goes. ... In the hammer, if you go to the USATF meet and you get top three, you can go represent the United States at (the world championships) that year. Coming out of high school it wasn't a dream of mine. I'd never even heard of it. Now it's like, yeah, that's something I really want to do. It's definitely a dream. It's up there on the bucket list."

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Friday's Scores By The Associated Press

BOYS BASKETBALL=

Baltic 48, Alcester-Hudson 36
Canton 62, Irene-Wakonda 58
Colman-Egan 51, Lake Preston 45
Crazy Horse 69, Bison 31
Custer 43, Belle Fourche 34
Dakota Valley 87, Dell Rapids 72
Elk Point-Jefferson 50, Beresford 49
Elkton-Lake Benton 58, Deubrook 38
Faith 66, Hettinger/Scranton, N.D. 52
Faulkton 55, Langford 47
Gayville-Volin 62, Centerville 50
Gregory 63, Scotland 27
Groton Area 48, Warner 38
Hamlin 55, Redfield 50, OT
Leola/Frederick 60, Florence/Henry 57
New Underwood 48, Bennett County 28
Platte-Geddes 65, Bon Homme 37
Rapid City Stevens 62, Sioux Falls Washington 55
Sioux Falls Lincoln 47, Rapid City Central 38
Sioux Falls Roosevelt 57, Pierre 45
Sturgis Brown 61, Hot Springs 28
Sully Buttes 52, Ipswich 44
Takini 69, Edgemont 61
Tea Area 67, Lennox 55
Tripp-Delmont/Armour 60, Avon 48
Vermillion 53, LeMars, Iowa 42
Viborg-Hurley 70, Parker 43
Watertown 54, Yankton 53
Webster 74, Sisseton 66
Wilmot 70, Northwestern 60
Winner 78, McLaughlin 75

GIRLS BASKETBALL=

Alcester-Hudson 53, Baltic 43
Arlington 45, Dell Rapids St. Mary 41
Avon 54, Tripp-Delmont/Armour 44
Belle Fourche 57, Custer 26
Beresford 34, Elk Point-Jefferson 32
Bison 72, Crazy Horse 54
Bon Homme 50, Platte-Geddes 33
Canistota 69, Chester 55
Castlewood 56, Waverly-South Shore 33
Chamberlain 53, Wagner 46
Colman-Egan 42, Lake Preston 39
Dakota Valley 67, Dell Rapids 49
Deubrook 54, Elkton-Lake Benton 30
Faulkton 0, Langford 0

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Flandreau 72, Madison 60
Gayville-Volin 46, Centerville 39
Gregory 49, Scotland 48
Groton Area 46, Warner 29
Hettinger/Scranton, N.D. 49, Faith 33
Ipswich 50, Sully Buttes 45, OT
Kadoka Area 73, Colome 42
Kimball/White Lake 41, Andes Central/Dakota Christian 37
LeMars, Iowa 49, Vermillion 32
Lennox 57, Tea Area 52
New Underwood 53, Bennett County 31
Rapid City Christian 54, Harding County 30
Rapid City Stevens 39, Sioux Falls Washington 36
Sanborn Central/Woonsocket 60, Highmore-Harold 46
Sioux Falls Lincoln 47, Rapid City Central 24
Sturgis Brown 69, Hot Springs 24
Timber Lake 67, Newell 62
Tri-State, N.D. 59, Britton-Hecla 33
Viborg-Hurley 70, Parker 43
Winner 77, McLaughlin 31
Wolsey-Wessington 59, Iroquois 36
Yankton 68, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 49
DWU/Culver's Classic=
Bridgewater-Emery 53, Jones County 23
Corsica/Stickney 49, DeSmet 45
Hanson 69, Lyman 54
Harrisburg 82, Mitchell 51
Howard 45, White River 38
Menno 54, Burke 39
POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=
Estelline/Hendricks vs. Oldham-Ramona/Rutland, ppd.

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

Wilson carries S. Dakota St. over Denver 90-78

BROOKINGS, S.D. (AP) — Douglas Wilson had 23 points as South Dakota State defeated Denver 90-78 on Friday night. Matt Dentlinger added 22 points for the Jackrabbits. Dentlinger also had 11 rebounds.

Noah Freidel had 16 points, eight assists and seven rebounds for South Dakota State (19-8, 10-2 Summit League), which earned its fifth consecutive win. Baylor Scheierman added six assists.

South Dakota State totaled 54 second-half points, a season best for the team.

Ade Murkey set Denver's single-game record at the Division I level with 42 points to go with 11 rebounds for the Pioneers (5-21, 1-11). Murkey's 42 points tied for fifth all-time in Denver's record book and was the most scored by a Denver player since Scott Williams scored 44 against Nebraska-Kerney on Feb. 3, 1990.

Jase Townsend added 14 points. Robert Jones had seven rebounds.

The Jackrabbits improve to 2-0 against the Pioneers on the season. South Dakota State defeated Denver 80-68 on Jan. 8. South Dakota State plays Purdue Fort Wayne at home on Sunday. Denver plays Nebraska Omaha on the road on Sunday.

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

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Ex-Indian Health Service doctor faces sex abuse charges

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — A former Indian Health Service physician in South Dakota faces federal charges that he sexually abused Native American patients.

Pedro Ibarra-Perocier, 58, of Wagner was indicted by a federal grand jury Feb. 4 on four counts of sexual abuse and four counts of abusive sexual contact involving his patients, according to U.S. Attorney for South Dakota Ron Parsons.

Ibarra-Perocier pleaded not guilty Thursday. Court records show he was released without bond but had to turn in his passport, the Rapid City Journal reported.

Ibarra-Perocier previously worked at the IHS clinic in Wagner on the Yankton Reservation. The allegations involve four adults between January 2014 and August 2018.

The indictment does not explain where or how Ibarra-Perocier allegedly abused his patients, but it says he engaged in sexual acts and contact with patients by threatening them and making them fearful. A trial date has not been set.

Earlier this week, a former IHS pediatrician was sentenced for sexually abusing Native American children while on the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota. Stanley Patrick Weber, 71, of Spearfish was sentenced in federal court to five consecutive life sentences and ordered to pay \$800,000 in fines.

In a statement Friday, the IHS said it has "made important strides to address and prevent sexual abuse in healthcare facilities and strengthen policies on patient protections and staff reporting responsibilities. Patients and employees of the Indian Health Service should never face sexual harassment or abuse."

South Dakota man indicted in \$71 million organics fraud

By **STEPHEN GROVES** Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Federal prosecutors have charged a Rapid City businessman in what they say was a \$71 million scheme to sell fake organic grain and seeds to fuel his extravagant lifestyle including a yacht, a multimillion dollar home and luxury cars.

The U.S. Attorney's Office filed an indictment for wire fraud and money laundering last week against Kent Duane Anderson, alleging he used a network of South Dakota businesses to sell non-organic grain and seed products as organic. Anderson made a profit of about \$25 million from the fake organic sales from October 2012 to December 2017, according to court documents.

Anderson was booked into the Pennington County jail on Thursday. He is scheduled to make an initial appearance in federal court in Rapid City on Friday afternoon.

According to court documents, Anderson operated a business called Green Leaf Resources that markets "certified organic" flax and canola seeds, meal and oils. But prosecutors allege he employed his sister-in-law and a college friend as "figurehead executives," who were certified as authorized organics handlers with the Department of Agriculture. He then used these certifications as "cover" to purchase non-organic products and resell them as organic.

A lawyer assigned to represent Anderson was not available for comment. No one answered phone calls to a number listed on the website of Green Leaf Resources.

Prosecutors allege that Anderson transferred nearly \$11 million from the fraudulent sales over five years into his personal accounts. He purchased a \$2.5 million home in Florida, an \$8 million yacht, and \$400,000 in jewelry, according to court documents.

Questions about Anderson's operation began arising last year. The state's Public Utilities Commission investigated a business owned by Anderson after receiving complaints that it was not making payments

and had purchased grain without the required license. Anderson's company did not respond to inquiries and requests to conduct an inspection, according to a March statement from the Public Utilities Commission.

Federal prosecutors allege that Anderson purchased non-organic products from two suppliers in Illinois and Minnesota. He had most of those products shipped to a warehouse in Tappen, North Dakota, where an employee would replace the legal documents that said they were non-organic with new documents certifying they were organic. The products would then be shipped to wholesale distributors, brokers, and other buyers who believed they had bought organic products.

Court documents say Anderson included a business profile with his records that described how he and his wife Aimee in 2005 started a business called Bar Two Bar Ranch in Belle Fourche to raise cattle and produce alfalfa hay. They began selling excess hay to ranches in Montana and Wyoming, then expanded to small grains and oilseed byproducts. In 2008, they decided to create Green Leaf Resources to focus on their feed production business.

Federal prosecutors are charging Anderson with wire fraud and money laundering that began in 2012.

Esper says Taliban deal is promising but not without risk

By **ROBERT BURNS** and **MATTHEW LEE** Associated Press

MUNICH (AP) — U.S. Defense Secretary Mark Esper said Saturday that a truce agreement between the United States and the Taliban that could lead to the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan is not without risk but "looks very promising."

Ahead of a formal announcement of the seven-day "reduction in violence" deal, Esper said it was time to give peace a chance in Afghanistan through a political negotiation. He spoke a day after a senior U.S. official said the deal had been concluded and would take effect very soon.

Expectations are that agreement will be formally announced on Sunday and that the reduction in violence will begin on Monday, according to people familiar with the plan.

"So we have on the table right now a reduction in violence proposal that was negotiated between our ambassador and the Taliban," Esper told an audience at the Munich Security Conference. "It looks very promising."

"It's my view as well that we have to give peace a chance, that the best if not the only way forward in Afghanistan is through a political agreement and that means taking some risk," he said. "That means enabling our diplomats and that means working together with our partners and allies on the ground to affect such a thing."

Esper and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo met on Friday in Munich with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, who has been skeptical of the scheme, which, if successful, would see an end to attacks for seven days and then the signing of a U.S.-Taliban peace deal. All-Afghan peace talks would then begin within 10 days as part of the plan, which envisions the phased withdrawal of U.S. forces over 18 months.

In remarks later to a group of reporters, Esper declined to say whether the U.S. had agreed to cut its troop levels in Afghanistan to zero. He said if the 7-day truce is successful and the next step toward Afghan peace talks begins, the U.S. would reduce its troop contingent "over time" to about 8,600. There currently are about 12,000 U.S. troops in the country.

The U.S. has not agreed to suspend or end its counter-terrorism operations in Afghanistan, which have been focused mainly on an Islamic State affiliate, known as ISIS-K, and al-Qaida, said Pentagon spokeswoman Alyssa Farah, who was traveling with Esper.

"Under any agreement, General Miller retains the authorities necessary to protect U.S. national security interests, including the authorities and capabilities to strike ISIS-K and al-Qaida," she said, referring to U.S. Gen Scott Miller, the commander of American and coalition forces in Afghanistan.

Ghani has not yet spoken publicly about the agreement which was finalized last week by U.S. special envoy for Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad and Taliban representatives in Doha, Qatar. Esper, however, said Ghani was supportive of the deal and had pledged to do his best to support it.

"I think he is fully on board," Esper said of Ghani. "He wants to lead his part of the process, which if we

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get to that would be a peace deal that would involve very soon afterward an inter-Afghan negotiation. He wants to be clearly a full partner in that and wants to lead on that and make sure that all Afghans come together."

Ghani has bickered with his partner in the current Unity Government, Abdullah Abdullah, over who will represent Kabul at the negotiating table. Ghani has insisted he lead the talks, while his political opponents and other prominent Afghans have called for more inclusive representation.

Separately on Saturday, NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg told the security conference that he also supported the plan but stressed that the alliance's mission in Afghanistan would continue in the short- and medium-term.

"We are not leaving Afghanistan but we are prepared to adjust our force level if the Taliban demonstrates the will and the capability to reduce violence and make real compromises that could pave the way for negotiations among Afghans for sustainable peace," he said.

Stoltenberg later told a small group of reporters that in his own discussion with Ghani on Friday, the Afghan president indicated he supported the idea of talks.

"The whole aim, and President Ghani has clearly supported this many times, is that we would like to initiate an inter-Afghan negotiation process," Stoltenberg said. "We can support Afghans, we can help them, but we cannot negotiate peace for them. They have to do that themselves, and they want to do it themselves."

He added: "We all understand that's a long way and will be a difficult process, with a lot of uncertainties and possible setbacks and surprises."

David Rising contributed to this story.

New virus cases fall; WHO says China bought the world time

By YANAN WANG Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — China reported 143 virus deaths and a dip in new cases Saturday while the head of the World Health Organization praised the country's efforts to contain the new disease, saying they have "bought the world time" and that other nations must make the most of it.

France, meanwhile, reported Europe's first death from the new virus, a Chinese tourist from Hubei province, where the disease emerged in December. The United States was preparing to fly home American passengers quarantined aboard a cruise ship in Japan.

China reported 2,641 new cases in the 24 hours through midnight Friday, raising its total to 66,492. Mainland China's death toll rose to 1,523.

The number of new cases was down from the 5,090 in the previous 24-hour period after authorities changed the basis for counting patients. Numbers of new cases have fluctuated, fueling both optimism the disease might be under control and warnings that such hopes are premature.

The U.N. health agency's director-general, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, urged governments to step up their efforts to prepare for the virus, saying "it's impossible to predict which direction this epidemic will take."

Tedros told a gathering of international foreign and security policy leaders in Germany on Saturday that WHO is encouraged there has not yet been widespread transmission outside China and that "the steps China has taken to contain the outbreak at its source appear to have bought the world time."

"We're encouraged that an international team of experts is now on the ground working closely with Chinese counterparts to understand the outbreak," Tedros told the Munich Security Conference.

But he said the agency is "concerned by the continued increase in the number of cases in China," and by reports about the number of health workers who have been infected or died.

"We're concerned by the lack of urgency in funding the response from the international community," Tedros said.

"We must use the window of opportunity we have to intensify our preparedness," he added. "China has

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bought the world time. We don't know how much time."

China's government suspended most access to Wuhan, the city at the center of the outbreak, on Jan. 23. Restrictions have expanded to cities with a total of 60 million people in the broadest anti-disease measures ever imposed. Restaurants, shops and other businesses nationwide were ordered to close.

The Lunar New Year holiday was extended to keep factories and offices closed, but now officials have been ordered to revive business activity as economic losses mount.

Authorities have announced measures to try to curb new infections as millions of workers crowd into planes, trains and buses to return to densely populated cities.

Under the new measures, people returning to Beijing will have to isolate themselves at home for 14 days, according to a notice published Friday. It said people who fail to comply will face legal consequences but gave no details.

COVID-19, a disease stemming from a new form of coronavirus, has spread to more than two dozen countries.

The 80-year-old Chinese tourist who died in France was hospitalized Jan. 25 with a lung infection, according to Health Minister Agnes Buzyn. His daughter also fell ill but authorities say she is expected to recover.

In Japan, the U.S. Embassy said a chartered aircraft will arrive late Sunday to fly home Americans aboard the cruise ship Diamond Princess in Yokohama, near Tokyo. The passengers have been quarantined aboard the ship since Feb. 5, but they will face another two-week quarantine after arriving in the United States.

Those who return to the U.S. will fly to Travis Air Force Base in California and some will fly onward to Lackland Air Force Base in Texas, said an embassy statement. It said no one with symptoms would be allowed aboard the flight.

So far, 285 people from the cruise ship have tested positive for the virus. Japan's Health Ministry allowed 11 passengers to disembark Friday. It said passengers above 80 years of age, those with underlying medical conditions and those who stayed in windowless cabins during the 14-day quarantine could move to a facility on shore.

On Thursday, the number of new cases reported by authorities in Hubei spiked to 15,152, mainly because China has changed the way it is counting. That included 13,332 that were diagnosed with doctors' analyses and lung imaging instead of the previous standard of laboratory testing. Health authorities said the new method would facilitate earlier treatment.

Nine more temporary hospitals have opened in gymnasiums and other public buildings, with 6,960 beds in Hubei, the National Health Commission announced. It said 5,606 patients with mild symptoms were being treated.

The ruling Communist Party is trying to restore public confidence following complaints leaders in Wuhan suppressed information about the disease. The party faced similar criticism after the 2002-03 outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome, or SARS.

The party should "strengthen areas of weakness and close up loopholes" after the epidemic exposed "shortcomings and deficiencies," President Xi Jinping said at a meeting of party leaders Friday, according to state media.

Extended closures of factories and businesses prevented a flood of travel after the Lunar New Year holiday, normally the Chinese industry's busiest season, officials said at a news conference.

Total volume of daily travelers is down 80% from last year, according to a deputy transportation minister, Liu Xiaoming.

Business losses are so severe that forecasters have cut their outlooks for China's economic growth.

The state-owned banking industry has provided more than 537 billion yuan (\$77 billion) in credit to industries such as retail, catering and tourism that have been hurt most, according to Liang Tao, vice chairman of the China Banking and Insurance Regulatory Commission.

This weekend, a team of WHO experts were due to begin a mission in China.

A WHO official, speaking at the conference in Munich, defended China's handling of the outbreak.

"Some of the rhetoric for me has not been helpful, not been helpful at all. China has a strong public health and health system," said Dr. Michael Ryan, WHO's chief of emergencies. "I think we as the global

community need to change our narrative if we're going to work successfully with China and other countries to stop this disease."

Associated Press writers Geir Moulson in Munich, Mari Yamaguchi in Tokyo and Elaine Ganley in Paris contributed to this report.

Body found in rough seas as UK faces another fierce storm

By PAN PYLAS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Rescuers found a body in rough seas following an extensive search Saturday off the coast of southeast England, as Britain faced a second straight weekend of wild winter weather and flooding.

The body was discovered by a lifeboat from the Royal National Lifeboat Institution and brought to shore, a spokesman for the local coast guard said.

The RNLI, with the assistance of police and a Royal Navy vessel, had scoured the sea near Margate starting before dawn after a distress call reporting a man overboard. The call is believed to have come from B Gas Margrethe, a 99-meter Maltese tanker that had been anchored off the coast of Margate.

Hurricane-force winds of up to 85 knots (98 mph) and monster waves that could reach over 100-foot-high ((30 meters)) were roaring across the North Atlantic on Saturday, the U.S. National Weather Service's Ocean Prediction Center said.

The fourth named storm of the season, dubbed Dennis by Britain's Met Office weather service, was expected to deepen through the weekend. Authorities urging people to take all possible precautions. Hundreds of flights were cancelled.

The Met Office had 22 flood warnings in place around England, which meant flooding was expected. The Irish Meteorologist Service issued a number of wind warnings, saying gusts of up to 120 kilometers per hour (75 mph) might be seen. Gale warnings were also issued in Iceland.

The weather is expected to strike all areas of Britain, including parts of northern England still recovering from Storm Ciara last weekend. That storm left at least eight people dead across Europe, including two in the U.K.

Airlines preemptively canceled hundreds of flights out of London and other U.K. airports, and railways warned about possible train delays and cancellations. Tens of thousands of passengers were being affected on a busy travel day for British families, as most schools in the country closed down for a mid-winter break.

Easyjet cancelled around 230 flights in and out of the country as wind speeds are set to hit 70 mph (113 kph). British Airways also cancelled flights.

Areas in northern England, which are still recovering from Ciara, faced up to 4 1/2 inches (120 centimeters) of rain on Saturday. The country's Environment Agency said flooding is likely to be worse than last weekend — when hundreds of homes were flooded as river burst their banks — since the rain will be falling on saturated ground.

Around 75 British army personnel and 70 reservists were helping out stretched communities in the flood-hit Calder Valley region in West Yorkshire, constructing barriers and repairing damaged flood defenses.

"Our armed forces are always ready to support local authorities and communities whenever they need it," Britain's Defense Secretary Ben Wallace said. "The rapid response of the Army today will help with provision of flood relief to local communities in West Yorkshire."

Trump doesn't heed Barr's request to cool tweeting on DOJ

By MICHAEL BALSAMO, COLLEEN LONG and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Unbowed by a public rebuke from his attorney general, President Donald Trump says he has the "legal right" to intervene in criminal cases and sidestep the Justice Department's historic independence. At the same time, it was revealed federal prosecutors have been ordered to review the criminal case of his former national security adviser.

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A day after Attorney General William Barr said the president's tweets were making it "impossible for me to do my job," Trump declared he had the right to ask the agency to intervene in cases but so far has "chosen not to." It was a rare public flare-up of tensions, simmering for weeks at the upper echelon of the Trump administration, as Barr marked one year on the job Friday.

While Barr complained that Trump's tweets undermine the department's perception as independent from political interference, he has proven to be eager to deliver on many of the president's investigative priorities — often laid out by Trump for all to see on Twitter.

The attorney general stepped in this week to alter the sentencing recommendation that Trump had denounced as too harsh for his ally Roger Stone. Also, Justice Department prosecutors are reviewing the handling of the federal investigation into Trump's former national security adviser Michael Flynn, a person familiar with the matter told The Associated Press on Friday. And Barr has appointed a U.S. attorney who is conducting a criminal investigation into the origins of the FBI's probe of the 2016 election that morphed into special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation of possible Trump-Russia cooperation.

Flynn has pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI during its probe of ties between the Trump campaign and Russia, but his sentencing has been postponed several times after he complained he was misled during his questioning. The U.S. attorney in St. Louis, Jeff Jensen, is working with Brandon Van Grack, a member of Mueller's team, to review the Flynn case, a Justice Department official said.

As president, Trump technically has the right to compel the Justice Department, an executive branch agency, to open investigations. But historically, when it comes to decisions on criminal investigations and prosecutions, Justice has functioned independently, unmoved and unbound by political sway. And that reputation is important to Barr, as he made clear in an interview Thursday on ABC News.

"I'm happy to say that, in fact, the president has never asked me to do anything in a criminal case," Barr said. "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."

The attorney general has repeatedly shared the same sentiment in private conversations with the president in recent weeks, telling Trump he was frustrated with the president's public comments and tweets about Justice Department cases, a person familiar with the matter told the AP. The person was granted anonymity to discuss the private conversations.

Barr was directly asked in the ABC interview whether he believed Trump had the authority to direct him to open an investigation.

In many cases yes, such as "terrorism or fraud by a bank or something like that," Barr said.

However, "If he were to say, you know, go investigate somebody because — and you sense it's because they're a political opponent, then an attorney general shouldn't carry that out, wouldn't carry that out."

Still, Barr has proven to be a largely reliable ally and defender of presidential power. That includes his preemptive framing of the results from special counsel Mueller's Trump-Russia investigation last year in a manner favorable to Trump when Mueller pointedly said he couldn't exonerate the president of obstruction of justice.

Trump has publicly and privately threatened payback in the form of investigations against his perceived enemies including former FBI Director James Comey and former FBI Director Andrew McCabe, whom prosecutors said Friday they would not charge with lying about leaking. He's also pressed for investigations into political rival Joe Biden and his son Hunter, especially following Trump's impeachment acquittal over a phone call where he asked Ukraine's leaders to investigate the Bidens.

And Flynn's case has become something of a cause for Trump supporters, who have seized on the former Trump aide's assertion that he was somehow ambushed by the FBI during an interview at the White House.

As for Comey, Trump has tweeted scores of times that he should be charged with crimes. Trump was particularly incensed that no charges were filed over the former FBI director's handling of memos about his interactions with Trump, according to a White House official and Republican close to the White House not authorized to speak publicly about private discussions.

The president angrily denounced the decision not to charge Comey to aides and berated Barr over it, according to the officials. Aides expected the decision not to charge McCabe could produce a similar angry reaction.

Trump has also repeatedly complained about FBI Director Christopher Wray in recent months, saying that Wray has not done enough to rid the bureau of people who are disloyal to him.

An administration official acknowledged there has been some tension between Trump and Barr in recent weeks, but said Trump still has confidence in his attorney general.

The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity in order to discuss private conversations, said Trump also knows it would be risky to remove Barr ahead of the 2020 election and that it is highly unlikely he could find a suitable replacement before then.

Earlier this week, the Justice Department overruled its own prosecutors — who had recommended in a court filing that Trump's longtime ally and confidant 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 entire trial team of prosecutors quit the case after the amended filing, and one quit the DOJ altogether.

Barr faced intense criticism over the decision, which followed just hours after Trump tweeted his displeasure about the harsher recommendation. Trump greeted the reversal with another tweet congratulating Barr for taking action, which proved to be a tipping point for the attorney general. He opted for a public interview to air his frustrations with the president while word was sent to the White House just a short time before it aired.

On Friday, Trump quoted one of Barr's comments in the interview: "The president has never asked me to do anything in a criminal case." A.G. Barr — and then Trump added in his tweet — "This doesn't mean that I do not have, as President, the legal right to do so, I do, but I have so far chosen not to!"

Stone is to be sentenced by a federal judge next week. His lawyers filed a motion Friday evening seeking a new trial, though details of the motion remained under seal.

House Democrats frustrated over the Senate's acquittal of Trump on impeachment charges want answers from Barr about what they see as his efforts to politicize federal law enforcement. House Judiciary Committee Chairman Jerrold Nadler said Barr will testify before the panel March 31.

The Justice 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.

Barr joined a roster of high-level aides who have publicly criticized Trump, though the rest left their jobs 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. And 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.

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

Questions complicate efforts to contain new virus from China

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Reports one day suggest the respiratory outbreak in China might be slowing, the next brings word of thousands more cases. Even the experts have whiplash in trying to determine if the epidemic is getting worse, or if a backlog of the sick is finally getting counted.

Continuing questions about the new virus are complicating health authorities' efforts to curtail its spread around the world. And the United States is taking the first steps to check that cases masquerading as the flu won't be missed, another safeguard on top of travel restrictions and quarantines.

Here's what you should know about the illness:

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WHAT IS THE NEW VIRUS?

It's a never-before-seen type of coronavirus, a large family of viruses that affect both animals and people. Some types cause the common cold. But two other types have caused severe disease outbreaks before: SARS, or severe acute respiratory syndrome, in late 2002, and MERS, or Middle East respiratory syndrome, which first appeared in 2012.

The World Health Organization officially named the new illness COVID-19, reflecting that it's a new coronavirus that emerged late last year. Common symptoms include fever, cough and shortness of breath. While serious cases can turn into pneumonia, most patients appear to have a fairly mild illness.

HOW FAST IS THE OUTBREAK GROWING?

There's some confusion about that. China's tally reached more than 66,000 cases Saturday, a huge increase from earlier in the week. Why? Chinese health authorities say they changed how they are counting. Instead of waiting for a virus test to confirm someone's diagnosis — there's a huge testing backlog — they're now counting patients on the basis of their symptoms and lung X-rays.

The WHO isn't sure that's a good idea, and wants to make sure people with flu or some other respiratory infection aren't getting caught in the mix.

Elsewhere, fewer than 600 cases have been reported outside of China — in other parts of Asia, Europe, the U.S. and Canada. The first case in Africa was reported Friday, in Egypt. Most involved travelers from China and people who came into close contact with them.

IS QUARANTINE WORKING?

China has put 60 million people in its hardest-hit cities under lockdown, an unprecedented response. Without a good count of how many people are sick, and when they got sick, it's hard to tell if it's working.

That's different from typical quarantine measures, which try to target people who may be at risk — those who were in China's hot zone or who came into contact with another patient anywhere else in the world. That's a way to buy time for health authorities to prepare if the virus starts to spread more widely.

But how to quarantine large numbers of people is a difficult question. The Diamond Princess cruise ship, which has the largest cluster of infections outside China, was quarantined in Japan with more than 3,500 passengers and crew. Experts have questioned if the close quarters have contributed to the spread. U.S. officials said Saturday it would evacuate its citizens on board and bring them to quarantine stations on Air Force bases in California and Texas.

In the U.S., about 600 people evacuated from hard-hit Hubei province in central China are still in quarantine at several military bases, apart from other people on the base but with some room to roam. For 14 days — what scientists believe to be the incubation period — they are checked for symptoms and tested if they show any.

As of Saturday, there were 15 cases in the U.S., including three of the evacuees.

COULD THE VIRUS BE SPREADING SILENTLY IN OTHER PLACES?

In the U.S., the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is starting a new effort to spot if that happens — by adding coronavirus testing to the network that normally tracks influenza. When a patient sample tests negative for flu, lab workers next will check it for the new virus.

The extra tests will start in public health laboratories in five cities: Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, Chicago and New York. But the surveillance will be expanded around the country in the coming weeks, said CDC's Dr. Nancy Messonnier.

HOW DOES INFECTION SPREAD?

Like typical respiratory viruses, it spreads mostly through droplets from coughs and sneezes. What about surfaces like doorknobs touched by that person blowing his nose? If the next person touches their own mouth, nose or eyes, infection is possible, like with the flu, but specialists don't think the virus can survive on surfaces for very long. Regular hand washing is a good way to avoid getting sick from any virus.

WHAT ABOUT TREATMENTS AND VACCINES?

The hunt is on for both. Currently, people who are seriously ill get standard pneumonia care including fluids and oxygen. In China, scientists are testing some medicines developed for other viruses to see if

they might tamp down this one.

Several research groups are on the trail of possible vaccines, and one being developed by the U.S. National Institutes of Health might begin first-step safety tests in people as early as spring. But specialists stress it would take far longer — best case scenario a year — to ready a vaccine for widespread use.

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Shift to digital census raises fear of Iowa-like breakdown

By **MIKE SCHNEIDER** Associated Press

ORLANDO, Fla. (AP) — The stakes are high when a major civic exercise involves a large population, new technology that has not been thoroughly tested and an entire country waiting on the results.

Just ask the organizers of the Iowa caucuses, which offered a cautionary tale on the technological woes that could befall a big political event. Some observers worry that this year's census carries the same potential for mayhem — except on an infinitely larger scale.

The U.S. Census Bureau plans to try out a lot of new technology. It's the first once-a-decade census in which most people are being encouraged to answer questions via the internet. Later in the process, census workers who knock on the doors of homes that have not responded will use smartphones and a new mobile app to relay answers.

A government watchdog agency, the Census Bureau's inspector general and some lawmakers have grown concerned about whether the systems are ready for prime time. Most U.S. residents can start answering the questionnaire in March.

"I must tell you, the Iowa (caucus) debacle comes to mind when I think of the census going digital," Eleanor Holmes Norton, the congressional delegate for the District of Columbia, said this week at a hearing on the census.

Cybersecurity is another worry. Experts consider the census to be an attractive target for anyone seeking to sow chaos and undermine confidence in the U.S. government, as Russia did in the 2016 presidential election.

In a worst-case scenario, vital records could be deleted or polluted with junk data. Even a lesser assault that interfered with online data collection could erode public confidence. In 2016, a denial-of-service attack knocked Australia's online census offline, flooding it with junk data.

The Census Bureau says it's ready. The agency promises that responses to the questionnaire will be kept confidential through encryption, and that it's working with the Department of Homeland Security and private-sector security experts to thwart cyber attacks. To hinder illegitimate responses, the bureau is blocking foreign IP addresses and stopping bots from filling out fake responses, among many other measures.

The bureau says it has developed two secure data-collection systems, so that if one goes down, the other can substitute. Other mechanisms are in place to prevent failure and to back up essential functions.

"All systems are go," bureau Director Steven Dillingham said.

For the past three years, the Government Accountability Office has placed the census on its list of high-risk programs, mainly because it is relying on technology that has not been used before.

Just last week, census officials decided to use a backup data-collection system for handling the online responses. That step was taken after officials grew concerned that the primary system, developed by a third-party contractor, would not be able to handle excessive traffic. The primary system experienced performance problems when up to 400,000 people were answering questions at the same time.

The backup system, called Primus, was developed in-house and can handle up to 600,000 users at once. But it was never tested during a test-run for the decennial census in Rhode Island two years ago.

"Late design changes such as a shift from one system to another can introduce new risks during a critical moment," Nick Marinos, the GAO's director of information technology, testified this week at the congress-

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sional hearing. "The bureau needs to quickly ensure that the system is ready and that contingency plans are finalized to reflect this change and fully tested before going live."

Then there's the mobile app for census takers who will be sent out to visit the homes of residents who have not filled out the forms by May. Bureau officials are still working to find out why the app sometimes needs to be restarted or reinstalled for it to work properly, according to a GAO report released this week.

In Iowa, a newly developed smartphone app was blamed for delaying the reporting of results from the first-in-the-nation presidential contest.

The Census Bureau has not finalized its backup plans for the online questionnaire system. As of the end of last year, the bureau still had to do 191 corrective actions for cybersecurity that were considered "high risk" or "very high risk," the GAO said.

Last summer, the bureau's Office of Inspector General identified several weaknesses in the agency's backup planning efforts, including the ability to recover data stored in the cloud in the event of a large-scale attack or disaster.

In the same report, the inspector general said the bureau did not securely use commercial cloud services during census preparations and found many security deficiencies that indicated the agency was "behind schedule and rushed to deploy its systems" for the Rhode Island test-run.

The inspector general currently is conducting another audit of the bureau's information-technology security, but there's no word on when it will be finished, said Robert Johnston, the agency's chief of staff.

In Iowa, fewer than 200,000 voters picked a candidate. The census will be conducted on a much grander scale as it attempts to count residents in almost 130 million households with the help of 52 IT systems. The nationwide headcount has been touted as the largest peacetime operation the government undertakes.

An accurate count is crucial for determining how many congressional seats each state gets and the distribution of \$1.5 trillion in federal spending. Respondents who do not want to answer the questionnaire online can do so by telephone or by mailing in a paper form.

Dillingham told lawmakers that the concerns raised by the inspector general had been remedied. The Census Bureau is prepared to distribute millions of paper forms in the event a catastrophe prevents people from responding online, bureau officials added.

"We can recover data if we had a breach," said Albert Fontenot, an associate director at the bureau. "At the worst case, we would send someone out to re-collect that data."

Associated Press Technology Writer Frank Bajak in Boston contributed to this report.

Follow Mike Schneider on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/MikeSchneiderAP>

Bridges, Zion lead U.S. over World in Rising Stars Challenge

By **ANDREW SELIGMAN AP Sports Writer**

CHICAGO (AP) — Miles Bridges soared like his boss in Chicago. Zion Williamson delivered his share of punishing dunks, even damaging the rim.

It all added up to a high-flying start to the All-Star weekend.

Bridges scored 20 points and took MVP honors, Eric Paschall added 23 more and the U.S. beat the World 151-131 in the Rising Stars Challenge on Friday night.

Bridges has been a bright spot for Charlotte in a difficult season. The Hornets are 11th in the Eastern Conference at 18-36. But the second-year pro put on a show in owner Michael Jordan's old home and was presented the MVP trophy by Hall of Famer and Chicago product Isiah Thomas.

"We wanted to come out and play hard in the Rising Stars and show what Charlotte is about — me, Devonte' (Graham) and P.J. (Washington)," Bridges said. "And that's what we did. I didn't have any extra motivation, really, I wouldn't say that. But MJ putting Chicago on the map, it definitely plays a big part, though."

Cleveland's Collin Sexton had 21 points, Atlanta All-Star Trae Young added 18 and Chicago product

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Kendrick Young of Miami chipped in with 16. Williamson scored 14 and had the baskets inside the United Center shaking whether he made or missed.

RJ Barrett of New York led the World with 27 points, and Memphis' Brandon Clarke scored 22.

The annual showcase of the top rookies and second-year players helped kick off the first All-Star weekend in the Windy City since 1988, when Jordan dazzled the home crowd at the old Chicago Stadium. Back then, His Airness edged Dominique Wilkins in a slam dunk contest that arguably remains the standard and scored 40 points to lead the East over the West in the game.

JAMMING

Williamson continued to dazzle after his highly anticipated debut for New Orleans got pushed back three months because of right knee surgery. Averaging 22.1 points in 10 games for the Pelicans, the No. 1 pick was unaware he bent the rim. It happened late in the first half, on an alley-oop off a between-the-legs feed from Ja Morant.

"Went into halftime and my teammates started telling me about it," he said. I don't know which dunk it was on, but I don't think it was me."

As impressive were two misses near the end of the game.

Williamson attempted a 360, only to have it go flying off the rim. Given a do-over as players on both teams stood and watched, he went between his legs and off the glass only to miss again.

KOBE TRIBUTE

On Friday, Kobe Bryant's presence loomed large.

Players wore patches featuring the numbers 2 and 24 surrounded by nine stars in honor of the Lakers great and his daughter, Gianna, who were among nine people killed in a helicopter crash on Jan. 26. Pau Gasol along with WNBA great Sue Bird addressed the crowd at midcourt as part of a pregame tribute to Gasol's former teammate and late NBA Commissioner David Stern.

Bryant also headlined a class of eight Hall of Fame finalists announced Friday, along with Kevin Garnett and Tim Duncan.

As for the game, itself? As expected, there were plenty of flashy dunks and not much in the way of defense.

Dallas All-Star Luka Doncic drew a big roar from the crowd when he banked a 3 from halfcourt just before the halftime buzzer to send the World to the locker room with an 81-71 lead. Bridges had the fans cheering late in the third quarter when he flipped the ball off the glass and jammed it during the quarter when the U.S. took control.

More AP NBA: <https://apnews.com/NBA> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

AP FACT CHECK: Trump's wall claim is beyond 'redemption'

By HOPE YEN and CALVIN WOODWARD Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — On the eve of the New Hampshire primary, President Donald Trump told a rally that people who are in the United States illegally are paying for his Mexico border wall. It was the latest iteration of his effort to convince the public that Mexico is covering the cost, just as he promised throughout his 2016 campaign and since.

Evidence to the contrary came three days later. The Pentagon announced it is taking \$3.8 billion approved by Congress for fighter aircraft, ships and other military programs and using the money to pay for the wall. The Defense Department took a similar step last year and may yet again. U.S. taxpayers are paying for the wall, not Mexico, as has been the case from the start.

Trump spread a variety of distortions at the rally, and still more in other venues during a week that came to be dominated by machinations involving the Justice Department. The release of his proposed budget prompted Democrats to wrongly accuse him of undermining Medicare.

The week in review:

THE WALL

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TRUMP: "You do know who's paying for the wall, don't you? Redemption from illegal aliens that are coming. The redemption money is paying for the wall." — New Hampshire rally Monday.

THE FACTS: To date, the money is coming from the U.S. treasury, meaning today's taxpayers and the future ones who will inherit the federal debt. To the extent any people who came into the U.S. illegally are kicking in for the wall, it's because they're working and paying taxes like other workers.

"Redemption" payments don't exist; Trump apparently meant to cite remittances. That refers to money that immigrants in the U.S. send to their countries of origin, often to family members. Trump has at various times talked about taxing or blocking such money but that has not been done.

Mexico flatly refused at the outset to pay for the wall. That has given rise to creative formulations by the president about how Mexico in some way is contributing. For example, he has projected that his updated trade agreement with Mexico and Canada will stimulate enough extra growth over the years to cover the cost. Even if that happens, which analysts widely doubt, the wall will have cost the U.S. money that it could have used for something else. It's not a payment from Mexico.

Trump freed up \$3.6 billion for the wall last year by diverting money from military construction projects as well as \$2.5 billion from approved counter-drug spending.

VOTER FRAUD

TRUMP: "Remember last time we won the primary tremendously. We should have won the election but they had buses being shipped up from Massachusetts, hundreds and hundreds of buses." — rally Monday in New Hampshire.

THE FACTS: Trump is once again trafficking in the unfounded conspiracy theory that buses of illegal voters traveled in from Massachusetts in 2016 to deprive him of a New Hampshire victory in the general election against Democrat Hillary Clinton.

The accusation that people from more liberal Massachusetts crossed state lines in buses and voted in 2016 was made by Republican Chris Sununu, who at the time won election as governor. Sununu quickly backed down, saying his talk about busloads of illegal voters was "more a figure of speech" — in other words, not reality. Sununu later told the New Hampshire news network NH1 that he was "not aware of any widespread voter fraud" in the state.

More broadly, Trump has repeatedly asserted but produced no evidence of widespread voting fraud in 2016 by people in the country illegally or by any group of people.

He tried, but the commission he appointed on voting fraud collapsed from infighting and from the refusal of states to cooperate when tapped for reams of personal voter data such as names, partial Social Security numbers and voting histories. Studies have found only isolated cases of voter fraud in recent U.S. elections and no evidence that election results were affected.

Loyola Law School professor Justin Levitt found 31 cases of impersonation fraud, for example, in about 1 billion votes cast in elections from 2000 to 2014.

401(k)

TRUMP, on workers' 401(k) investments: "Up 90%, up 104%. Is there anybody doing badly with the 401(k)? ... Don't put up your hand, I don't believe you. The 401(k)s, they're up 90%, 95%." — New Hampshire rally Monday.

THE FACTS: That's misleading at best.

There have indeed been 401(k) increases of 100% or more since 2017, but those were largely among workers with fewer than four years at their job, according to the Employee Benefits Research Institute. The increases are big for recent and younger employees because they generally start with meager savings. The gains come in part from workers setting aside money from their own paychecks and contributions from their employers, not just market returns.

In that circumstance, it's unremarkable to see a \$1,000 401(k) account double in a year, for example, when a young worker and perhaps the employer is paying into it.

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Older workers with more than 20 years on the job have seen gains of roughly 50% over three years in their retirement accounts, thanks both to contributions from paychecks and market gains.

Moreover, the S&P 500 — the broadest measure of the U.S. stock market — was up 47.6% from Trump's inauguration through Monday's close.

Some 401(k) averages are problematic for Trump's claims to be generating prosperity because many workers lack the savings for a comfortable retirement. The median account balance was \$22,217 in 2018 in 401(k) and similar plans for which investment giant Vanguard was the record-keeper. That's down from \$26,331 in 2017.

IMPEACHMENT

TRUMP, on impeachment: "It wasn't even close. I want to thank our Republican senators and our Republican House members; they were tremendous. In the House, we won 196 to nothing, and then we got three Democrats."

THE FACTS: By that measure, the San Francisco 49ers won the Super Bowl 20-0. They actually lost it 31-20 to the Kansas City Chiefs.

If you only count your own score, you win every vote and every game.

The House impeached Trump on a 230-197 vote on the first article, outlining abuse of power charges, and a 229-198 vote on the second article covering obstruction of Congress. That's because most of the majority Democrats backed impeachment.

Trump went on to say: "In the Senate, other than Romney, we had — we got 52 to nothing."

Again, he ignores votes from the Democrats. Trump was acquitted of impeachment charges after senators in the Republican-controlled Senate narrowly rejected Democratic demands to summon witnesses and extend the trial. The Senate acquitted Trump by votes of 52-48 on abuse of power and 53-47 on obstructing Congress.

Utah Sen. Mitt Romney was the only Republican to vote for conviction, doing so on the abuse of power charge.

DEMOCRATS ON MEDICARE

JOE BIDEN on Trump's proposed budget: "Look at the budget he just submitted. He eviscerates Medicare." — CBS interview Monday.

HOUSE SPEAKER NANCY PELOSI: "One week after the President paid lip service to protecting the health care of American families, his budget betrays his values with cruel cuts to Medicare and Medicaid. Vulnerable families and seniors deserve better." — tweet Monday.

SENATE DEMOCRATIC LEADER CHUCK SCHUMER: "By proposing severe cuts to Medicaid and Medicare, President Trump's latest budget is simply a continuation of his war to rip away health care from millions of Americans, including people with preexisting conditions." — statement Monday.

THE FACTS: The leading Democrats are engaging in a timeworn political tactic known as 'Mediscare.' Trump's budget doesn't gut Medicare, and it wouldn't reduce benefits to seniors.

The budget's \$465 billion over 10 years in Medicare cuts would come from lower projected payments to hospitals and other service providers. For example, the budget calls for equalizing Medicare payments for similar services delivered in a hospital-owned facility and a doctor's office, saving about \$164 billion over 10 years. Hospital-based services generally command higher reimbursement now, a practice that has prompted criticism.

The budget also underscores Trump's support for legislation to lower drug costs for seniors enrolled in Medicare's Part D prescription plan.

The outlook is worse for Medicaid, which covers low-income people, including seniors and disabled people who qualify for both programs. Trump's budget signals his intention to press for significant Medicaid cuts, which could lead states to scale back some benefits.

VETERANS

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TRUMP, boasting of accomplishments for veterans: "Something that couldn't be done for 44 years, they say, and that's Veterans Choice. That's one of the reasons, I think, the VA is doing so well. " — veterans' event Tuesday.

THE FACTS: Actually, President Barack Obama won passage of the Veterans Choice program, which gives veterans the option to see private doctors outside the VA medical system at government expense. Congress approved the program in 2014, and Obama signed it into law. Trump expanded it.

The program's impact on improving VA care has been unclear.

The VA has said it does not expect a major increase in veterans seeking care outside the VA under Trump's expanded program, partly because wait times in the private sector are typically longer than at VA. "The care in the private sector, nine times out of 10, is probably not as good as care in VA," VA Secretary Robert Wilkie told Congress last year.

In 2019, 35 percent of all VA appointments were with outside physicians, slightly lower than the 36 percent in 2017.

PHILIPPINES

TRUMP, responding to word that the Philippines will end a security pact allowing U.S. forces to train in the country: "We helped them defeat ISIS. ... But if you look back, if you go back three years ago, when ISIS was overrunning the Philippines, we came in and, literally, single-handedly were able to save them from vicious attacks on their islands." — Wednesday at the White House.

THE FACTS: He's wrong in saying Islamic State fighters were overrunning the Philippines and that the U.S. "single-handedly" saved the country from them.

Only dozens of IS fighters are known to have gone to the Philippines since the rise of the group in the Mideast, and the local militants who aligned with the organization number in the hundreds.

In May 2017, in the operation touched on by Trump, more than 600 IS-aligned local militants, backed by a smattering of foreign jihadists, laid siege to Marawi, a small Islamic city in the largely Roman Catholic country. They held control of several neighborhoods and multiple buildings. Philippine troops launched a massive offensive and routed them after five months.

U.S. and Australian aircraft helped with surveillance. U.S. troops were not engaged in combat. The Philippine Constitution prohibits that.

TRUMP ON BLOOMBERG

TRUMP: "Mini Mike is a 5'4" mass of dead energy who does not want to be on the debate stage with these professional politicians. No boxes please." — tweet Thursday.

THE FACTS: Democratic presidential contender Mike Bloomberg is not that short.

In a letter released by Bloomberg's campaign in December, Bloomberg's doctor said the candidate is 5 feet, 7 inches, and 165 pounds.

Bloomberg once listed his height on his driver's license as 5-foot-10, which he isn't. When he was mayor of New York City, the New York newspapers variously reported his height at 5-foot-6, 5-foot-7 and just shy of a 5-foot-8 aide.

Trump shortchanged all that in his tweet, cutting Bloomberg's height by several inches.

Trump's own height has been a moving target. He's been listed at 6-foot-3-inches by the White House physician. But in 2016, Politico reported that his driver's license had him as 6-foot-2, the same height as on his Selective Service registration card in 1964.

Associated Press writers Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar, Josh Boak, Christopher Rugaber and Jill Colvin in Washington and Jim Gomez in Manila, Philippines, contributed to this report.

EDITOR'S NOTE — A look at the veracity of claims by political figures.

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Trump looks to rev up his base at Daytona 500

By KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump is out to rev up his appeal with a key voting demographic — NASCAR fans — as he takes in the Daytona 500 on Sunday.

NASCAR drivers may veer to the left during their trip around the oval racetrack, but their fans lean right, which helps explain the regularity with which GOP presidents have made their way to the track.

Trump will be the second sitting president to attend the Daytona 500, after George W. Bush in 2004. Like Trump, he also attended the race during a presidential election year. Republican presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush also visited the track at Daytona but during races other than the 500.

This year, Trump will serve as grand marshal and give the command for drivers to start their engines.

Ari Fleischer, the White House spokesman under George W. Bush, said the visit should appeal to Trump on two fronts.

"There's a real sense of positive, overwhelming affirmation to hear the roar of the crowd. What politician doesn't want that?" Fleischer said. "Secondly, there's what I call the reverberation effect. People watching at home, who hear the roar of the crowd for a president, that can drive them toward some sense of approval or fondness or liking for the president."

Just in case anyone misses the point, Trump's reelection campaign will run a TV ad during the Fox broadcast of the race and fly an aerial banner near the speedway.

Trump scored a coup in 2016 when Brian France, then NASCAR's chairman and chief executive, endorsed him in the presidential race. While France's endorsement was a personal matter, some critics said it hurt NASCAR's efforts to boost its appeal among minorities. And Trump didn't help matters when he repeatedly claimed he had received "NASCAR's endorsement" rather than France's.

In 1984, Reagan became the first sitting president to attend a NASCAR race. That July, he started the Firecracker 400 at Daytona International Speedway, where he gave the command, "Gentlemen, start your engines!" from aboard Air Force One. Later, the plane landed at Daytona International Airport behind the speedway in full view of the fans. It was at that race that Richard Petty captured his historic 200th victory.

Reagan stuck around until the end and even did a few laps of radio play-by-play during the race, congratulated Petty and then ate chicken with drivers, crew members, NASCAR employees and their families in the garage area.

The senior Bush's trip to Daytona occurred in 1992. As Reagan's vice president, he also served as the honorary starter for the 25th running of the Daytona 500.

President Barack Obama's initial presidential campaign was presented with the opportunity to sponsor a car in a NASCAR race, but eventually declined that chance. However, Obama routinely invited the winners of the NASCAR Cup Series championship to the White House, a tradition Trump has continued.

Last year, Trump took that outreach a step further, awarding the Presidential Medal of Freedom, one of the nation's highest civilian honors, to Roger Penske, a businessman and founder of one of the world's most successful motorsports teams.

Democrat Bill Clinton didn't get as friendly a NASCAR reception as the GOP presidents.

During his visit to a NASCAR race as a candidate in September 1992, the question of his lack of Vietnam-era military service was still dogging his campaign. Many fans at the Southern 500 in Darlington, South Carolina, booed and heckled him. By contrast, when George W. Bush attended the Daytona 500, he received rock-star treatment.

About 100,000 people are expected to attend this year's race and millions more will watch on television. About 9 million people took in last year's race on television.

'Parasite' shines light on South Korean basement dwellers

By JUWON PARK Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — Kim Da-hye, a 29-year-old South Korean, said that moving into a semi-basement apartment was her least-preferred option when she was looking for a new place to live.

But after a rigorous search and a close examination of her finances, she was forced to settle for a "banjiha," the Korean word for a cramped basement flat.

South Korean director Bong Joon-ho's Oscar-winning film "Parasite" has brought banjiha dwellers like Kim to worldwide attention, thanks to its depiction of two families — one living in a semi-basement apartment and the other in an airy mansion — and the differences in their social status.

In 2015, around 1.9% of South Koreans lived in semi-basement apartments, according to data from Statistics Korea. It's an affordable choice for urban dwellers in Seoul, one of the most expensive cities in Asia.

The apartments, which are often cramped and sometimes squalid, generally cost between \$210 and \$500 a month with a hefty deposit.

Kim, who moved into her \$211-a-month banjiha apartment after leaving her job to take care of her mother, is no fan of her current accommodations, which flood during the rainy season.

"During one summer, I left the house with the window open," she said. "When I came back, there was water all over and the walls were wet."

She says that when she dries her laundry, "the walls get damp and my laundry smells."

Prior to moving in, she was very concerned about the apartment's toilet, which sits much higher than the floor in order to prevent flooding. "My bathroom has stairs just like that place," Kim said, referring to the basement toilet in the film that spews out filthy sludge during a flood that destroys the house.

"I could slip while climbing the stairs," Kim said, laughing and pointing at the two steep steps leading to the square bathroom. She joked that she doesn't attempt to go to the bathroom when she's drunk.

Since the apartment is half underground, it is difficult for sunlight to seep through the window, causing the walls to mold.

"It's easy to see inside from outside and vice versa," Kim said, adding that her window also invites dust from cars and motorcycles on the street.

She said she has mixed feelings about the film despite sharing her name — Da-hye — with the daughter of the affluent family.

"At the start of the movie when an image flashed of a drunkard who was peeing on the street, I didn't find it funny," she said. "I felt a bit bitter because (the movie) had moments I could totally relate to. I had mixed feelings because it didn't feel like someone else's story."

"I thought it really resembled reality," Kim said. "(The father in the movie) wanted to climb higher but ended up going lower than where he was before. That's similar to how I feel about my future."

US defense chief slams China as rising threat to world order

By ROBERT BURNS and MATTHEW LEE Associated Press

MUNICH (AP) — U.S. Defense Secretary Mark Esper on Saturday cast China as a rising threat to world order — saying the world's most populous nation steals Western know-how, intimidates smaller neighbors and seeks an "advantage by any means and at any cost."

A frequent critic of China, Esper used an address to an international security conference in Munich, Germany, to give his most comprehensive condemnation yet of a communist country that he said tops the Pentagon's list of potential adversaries, followed by Russia, "rogue states" like North Korea and Iran, and continuing threats from extremist groups.

"The Chinese Communist Party is heading even faster and further in the wrong direction — more internal repression, more predatory economic practices, more heavy-handedness, and most concerning for me, a more aggressive military posture," he said.

Esper stressed that the United States does not want conflicts with China, and noted that the U.S. gov-

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ernment has provided medical supplies to help China combat a coronavirus outbreak that has infected over 67,000 people. Still, he said Beijing has made clear its long-term intentions and said Europe and the rest of the world must "wake up" to the threats that China poses.

"The Communist Party and its associated organs, including the People's Liberation Army, are increasingly operating in theaters outside its borders, including Europe, and seeking advantage by any means, and at any cost," he said.

"While we often doubt the transparency and forthrightness of Beijing, when it comes to their security aims, we should take the Chinese government at its word," he said. "They have said that by 2035, the PRC intends to complete its military modernization, and, by 2049, it seeks to dominate Asia as the preeminent global military power."

With words that echoed the Trump administration's criticisms of Iran, Esper said China represses its people and threatens its neighbors.

"We want China to behave like a normal country," Esper said, adding "and that means the Chinese government needs to change its policies and behaviors."

Esper and his immediate predecessor, Jim Mattis, have sought to shift the main focus of U.S. military and security policy toward China and away from small wars against insurgents and extremists. U.S. allies in Europe, while concerned about China's rise, are more immediately worried about Russia.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi later responded, telling the forum that Esper and U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo "say the same thing wherever they go about China" and dismissed their remarks as "lies."

"The root cause of all these problems and issues is that the U.S. does not want to see the rapid development and rejuvenation of China, and still less would they want to accept the success of a socialist country," Wang said through a translator.

He said China had a "right to develop" and said if Beijing and Washington worked together, it would benefit the whole world.

"The most important task for China and the U.S. is to sit down together to have a serious dialogue and find a way for two major countries with different social systems to live in harmony and interact in peace," he said. "China's ready and we hope the U.S. will work with us."

In remarks to the conference earlier Saturday, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said China presents challenges as well as opportunities for Western nations. He said Europe and the United States need to work out a united approach to China's rise.

"There are opportunities, but also many challenges," Stoltenberg said, adding that it's important for Western countries to keep open lines of communication with Beijing.

Also at the Munich conference, Pompeo refuted assertions that the United States under President Donald Trump was rejecting its traditional international leadership role.

"I'm happy to report that the death of the transatlantic alliance is grossly over-exaggerated," Pompeo said. "The West is winning."

David Rising contributed to this report.

No handshakes: Viral outbreak spooks Asian places of worship

By JIM GOMEZ Associated Press

MANILA, Philippines (AP) — In a popular Catholic church in the Philippines, nearly half of the pews were empty for Sunday Mass. The few hundred worshippers who showed up were asked to refrain from shaking others' hands or holding them during prayers to prevent the spread of the virus that started in China.

In Hong Kong, Cardinal John Hon Tong, wearing a mask, announced the suspension of public Masses for two weeks and urged churchgoers to instead watch them online.

Buddhist temples, Christian churches and Muslim mosques have been ordered closed since Jan. 29 in mainland China, where the new coronavirus strain was first detected in the central city of Wuhan, the

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epicenter of the outbreak. Mosques have canceled weekly Friday prayers since January under an order to avoid "collective religious activities."

Religious leaders should encourage Muslims to "trust the party" and avoid crowds, the Communist Party-controlled body that oversees China's officially authorized mosques said in a statement.

The restrictions and dwindling crowds in religiously diverse places of worship underscore the extent of the scare over the outbreak that has permeated many aspects of life in the hard-hit Asian region. The virus has killed more than 1,500 people and infected more than 67,000 others, mostly in China, where several cities that are home to more than 60 million people have been placed under lockdown in an unprecedented effort to contain the disease.

All but three of the deaths have been in China. Japan, Hong Kong and the Philippines have reported one fatality each.

In Japan, where Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines are tourist destinations, a sharp decline in the number of foreign visitors has been a palpable setback. At normally popular Suzumushi, or Crickets, temple, a sign read, "Due to the impact of the COVID-19, no waiting expected," using the name given to the disease by the World Health Organization.

"We assimilate with parishioners and many other people. We know that the talk of the town is really this virus and it's obvious that many are scared," said the Rev. Siegfred Arellano, a priest at the Binondo church in the Philippine capital's Chinatown.

Attendance at Masses, Arellano said, "has really dropped."

After consulting health experts, the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines announced steps late last month to fight the virus. Churchgoers were advised to avoid hand contact and receive the Eucharist, which symbolizes the body of Jesus Christ, in the hand instead of the mouth.

They said holy water should be replaced more often in church stoups and a protective cloth installed on the grills separating priests and worshippers in confessional boxes.

In Hong Kong, Tong initially approved precautions that included a choice for churchgoers to watch Sunday Mass online. Those who opted to go to churches were asked to wear masks and told that "singing is suspended," except for short hymns like "Alleluia." The new virus is spread through respiratory droplets, according to health officials.

Tong later announced the two-week suspension of Masses, saying the move was crucial to suppressing the outbreak, and asked Hong Kong's 400,000-strong Catholic community not to panic.

Masses in Singapore's Catholic churches have also been suspended indefinitely starting Saturday to contain the spread of the virus. The city-state has reported that 67 people have been infected, including a senior pastor and several members of the Grace Assembly of God church, which has shut down two premises and quarantined all staff.

Crowds also have thinned at Bangkok's popular Wat Pho, a centuries-old Buddhist temple complex known for its giant reclining Buddha. The temple is normally visited by thousands of tourists, many of them Chinese, during the peak travel season from December to February, but large numbers of visitors as well as locals have stayed away since the outbreak began, said Phra Maha Udom Panyapho, a monk in charge of tourism at the temple.

A Protestant church in Seoul shut its doors and switched entirely to online worship services after one of its followers tested positive for the virus on Jan. 30.

Other Protestant churches in South Korea have sprayed their halls and rooms with disinfectant, canceled children's Bible school programs and asked followers to minimize socializing. Hundreds of Catholic churches in the country have halted the use of holy water stoups, allowed churchgoers to wear masks during Masses and discouraged those with flu-like symptoms or those who came from countries with confirmed cases of infection from attending.

Unlike public areas such as shopping malls, recreational centers and parks, discouraging the devout from going to their places of worship and imposing other restrictions on sacred sites can be extra sensitive. Amid the risks, some devotees consider going to religious gatherings as a test of faith.

"The virus can't dampen my faith," said Rey Gilber, a 55-year-old father of two who went to Mass at the

Binondo church in Manila with his family. "God is always there and won't abandon us."

A key mosque in Malaysia's administrative capital of Putrajaya and two other mosques briefly closed their doors last month to non-Muslim visitors amid the virus scare, but later reopened after Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad called the move irresponsible.

Tens of thousands of ethnic Hindus, meanwhile, gathered last weekend to celebrate an annual festival called Thaipusam in the central Malaysian state of Selangor, undeterred by the outbreak. Malaysia has reported 19 cases of the virus.

Still, hundreds of staff and temple workers along with two dozen ambulances stood by. Emergency medical outposts were established as a precaution at the Batu Caves temple on a limestone hill, where pilgrims and tourists descended to watch devotees pierce their skin with hooks and skewers and carry offerings up a flight of 272 steps to the temple.

"We will not get the virus because God exists here," said Saratha, a 60-year-old housewife.

Without a cure in sight, many Asians have turned to faith.

Religious leaders across Asia have issued public prayers for the sick to recover, the contagion to stop and governments and international health agencies to find a cure.

Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority country, has not had any confirmed cases and residents walk about and pray in groups five times a day in mosques without masks. More than 60 people with pneumonia-like symptoms, including several foreigners, were placed under observation but later tested negative for the virus.

Indonesian Health Minister Terawan Agus Putranto said a strong immunity, healthy lifestyle and prayers were the best weapons against the outbreak.

"The key is to keep praying and maintain your immunity," Putranto said. "Don't underestimate the power of prayer."

Associated Press journalists Aaron Favila and Joael Calupitan in Manila, Philippines; Kiko Rosario and Preeyapa Khunsong in Bangkok; Ken Moritsugu and Joe McDonald in Beijing; Kim Tong-hyung and Hyung-jin Kim in Seoul, South Korea; Mari Yamaguchi in Tokyo; Eileen Ng in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; and Niniek Karmini in Jakarta, Indonesia, contributed to this report.

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Warren Buffett's son helps Colombia kick cocaine curse

By **JOSHUA GOODMAN** Associated Press Writer

TIBU, Colombia (AP) — With Colombian military snipers in position, Howard Buffett descends from a helicopter and trudges through the wet grass in steel-toe boots chewed through by his dog's teeth.

Waiting under a tin-roofed shack is a small group of coca farmers. They've never heard of multi-billionaire investor Warren Buffett, but after decades of neglect by their own government they're grateful for the outstretched hand of his eldest son, who they refer to simply as "the gringo."

"There's a saying here: The less you know, the better," said Rubén Morantes, his leathery skin and calloused hands a testament to a lifetime of tillage in one of Colombia's most-dangerous territories, where outsiders are traditionally mistrusted.

For nearly two decades Buffett has crisscrossed the world giving away part of his father's fortune to promote food security, conflict mitigation and public safety. But his latest gamble is one of the most daunting yet: helping Colombia kick its cocaine curse.

He is focusing on Tibu, heart of the remote, notoriously lawless Catatumbo region bordering Venezuela where Buffett accompanied President Iván Duque.

Tibu has the second largest coca crop in all of Colombia — 28,200 acres (11,400 hectares), according to the United Nations. Drug production as well as violence has skyrocketed in the area since armed groups

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filled the void left by retreating rebels who signed a peace deal with the government in 2016.

The Howard G. Buffett Foundation has committed to spending \$200 million over the next few years to transform the impoverished municipality into a model of comprehensive state building. Plans include strengthening security forces and helping farmers secure land titles and substitute coca — the raw material for cocaine — with licit crops like cacao.

The first component is building 300 kilometers (185 miles) of roads to connect the municipality's 37,000 residents for the first time with national and international markets. It's a challenge made more difficult by lurking guerrillas who last year detonated a homemade bomb as army engineers were working on the road, killing five people and injuring several.

"The only way we have confidence that farmers can grow legal crops is if they can get those crops to market," Buffett told farmers during a visit last month with Duque to La Gabarra, a rural outpost in Tibu. It was the first time any Colombian president had visited the blood-soaked hamlet.

The plan envisions subsidies and training for farmers as they switch crops, as well as helping them find buyers. It also aims to strengthen infrastructure for local law enforcement.

But some experts worry Buffett's enthusiasm for speeding Colombia's development is no match for entrenched corruption in rural areas run like political fiefdoms. There's also the challenge posed by thousands of Venezuelan migrants who lack roots in the community and are being targeted for recruitment by criminal gangs.

A lot is riding on Buffett's investment.

Not since the start of the U.S.-led Plan Colombia two decades ago have so many resources converged on a single geographical area, said Álvaro Balcázar, who helped the government negotiate with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia the section of the peace deal focusing on illicit crops.

"There's no precedent for something on such large a scale," Balcázar said. "But the region is strategic for consolidating peace in Colombia."

Like his father, Buffett, 65, has a reputation for folksy, Midwestern plain speech and self-effacing humor. Although he's a three-time college dropout, his father wants him to succeed him as the non-executive chairman of Berkshire Hathaway, the \$550 billion conglomerate that owns companies such as Duracell, Dairy Queen and GEICO insurance as well as major stakes in leading U.S. airlines and banks.

But he's spent much of his adult life roving the world taking wildlife photos and writing books. He's also a corn farmer and made headlines in 2017 by briefly serving as the sheriff of Macon County, Illinois, where he lives and his foundation is based.

He began exploring the world as a teenager on a trip to Soviet-controlled Prague in 1969 to visit one of the many exchange students his mother hosted at their home in Omaha, Nebraska. But his love of travel hasn't been matched by culinary curiosity: In Catatumbo, he carried around a blue, insulated lunch pack containing his requisite PB&J sandwich and a Dr. Pepper.

As a philanthropist, his priority now is helping Colombia and El Salvador, whose fight against drug trafficking has a direct impact on the U.S. Between the two countries he has already spent or committed \$310 million, including the funding in El Salvador of a new police forensics center and a modern system to help the country's prosecutors track criminal investigations.

As a volunteer police officer who logged 678 hours on patrol last year, Buffett has seen firsthand the human toll caused by drug addiction. A few weeks before traveling to Colombia, he and a partner were staking out a motel in Decatur, Illinois, at 1 a.m. when they arrested a man possessing crack. With him was a woman who said she had a drug problem, so Buffett paid for her to stay at the hotel two nights. Later, he referred her to a county rehab facility paid for with a gift from the Buffett Foundation in the hopes she would get help.

"These are people who need our help," he said. "They're not criminals."

He has turned to Latin America after years of focusing much of his attention on Africa and especially Rwanda, where he works with the government on sustainable agriculture. He spent so much time at his farm in South Africa in the 1990s that he obtained permanent residency.

Buffett began working in Colombia in 2008 helping pop star Shakira set up schools in her hometown

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of Barranquilla. He's also funded an army unit removing thousands of landmines strewn across former conflict zones. Leveraging his business contacts, he established a program to help around 100 families in southern Colombia switch from growing coca to producing high-quality coffee for Nespresso.

While an enthusiastic supporter of the 2016 peace deal, he has nonetheless struck a close relationship with Duque, a law-and-order conservative who rode into office attacking the agreement.

Duque has vowed to slash cocaine production in half by the end of 2023. Production of the drug skyrocketed after his predecessor — Nobel Peace Prize laureate Juan Manuel Santos — halted aerial eradication in 2015 due to health concerns over the herbicides used. But reaching that goal requires huge resources the government doesn't have, as well as overcoming the indifference of urban voters who are removed from the conflict and have their own growing list of demands.

That's where Buffett steps in.

The \$200 million Buffett has pledged for Tibu is more than triple what the government has spent the past two years altogether on public works in 170 high-risk municipalities that are part of a rural development rescue plan mandated by the peace deal. The U.S. Agency for International Development spends \$230 million annually in Colombia, although its projects are spread across the country.

Beyond the big check, long-time partners praise the Buffett Foundation for being independent and nimble. It's funded from an annual gift in Berkshire Hathaway stock by Warren Buffett, so it can take risks few are willing to attempt, development experts say.

"We're accountable mainly to the IRS," jokes Buffett, who sees setbacks like a venture capitalist who must eat crow before finding wild success.

"If you're a charity, and you're going to have your annual banquet to raise a lot of money, you can't stand up there and tell people how you had these five failures and this one success. People aren't going to write checks," he said. "We'll make a decision in five minutes if we know what we want to do."

He is skeptical of the U.S. government and United Nations, preferring not to work with either.

"The reason is because we can't depend on them," said Buffett, who said he was burned badly by USAID in 2011 when it abandoned a joint \$10 million seed program for starving farmers in South Sudan just as fighting broke out in the world's newest independent state.

"The bullets started flying and they pulled out. But it's like, you're in South Sudan, so of course bullets are going to fly," he said.

Instead, the foundation relies on partners known for delivering results quickly with slim overhead — a combination he says is hard to find among the "beltway bandits" profiting from U.S. foreign aid outlays. One accompanying him to Catatumbo is Portland, Oregon-based Mercy Corps, which is helping farmers sort through Colombia's bureaucratic maze to obtain land titles.

In a nod to his father's reputation for common sense, Buffett seeks frequent counsel from the so-called "Oracle of Omaha."

"He's my sounding board, kind of like my conscience in a way," Buffett said. "But he never asks, 'Why are you doing that?' or 'Why you're taking that risk?'"

In Tibu, after cracking a few jokes and planting a cacao tree, he seemed beside himself with joy even as the presidential committee hustled to quickly depart as heavy fog threatened to maroon them in the middle of nowhere.

"I know Emilio is very worried about leaving," Buffett told the farmers through a translator, referring to Duque's post-conflict adviser, Emilio Archila. "But I'm not, because there's lots of chocolate here."

Joshua Goodman on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/APjoshgoodman>

McCabe, an ex-FBI official targeted by Trump, not charged

By ERIC TUCKER and MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Federal prosecutors have declined to charge former FBI Deputy Director Andrew McCabe, closing an investigation into whether the longtime target of President Donald Trump's ire lied to

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federal officials about his involvement in a news media disclosure, McCabe's legal team said.

The decision, coming at the end of a tumultuous week between the Justice Department and the White House, is likely to further agitate a president who has loudly complained that federal prosecutors have pursued cases against his allies but not against his perceived political enemies.

The action resolves a criminal investigation that began nearly two years ago with a referral from the Justice Department's inspector general's office, which concluded that McCabe had repeatedly lied about having authorized a subordinate to share information with a newspaper reporter for a 2016 article about an FBI investigation into the Clinton Foundation.

The case was handled by the U.S. attorney's office in Washington, which was at the center of a public rift with Justice Department leadership this week over the recommended sentence for Trump ally Roger Stone. Senior Justice Department officials overruled a decision on a recommended prison sentence that they felt was too harsh, prompting the trial team to quit the case. Attorney General William Barr also took a rare public swipe at Trump by saying in a television interview that the president's tweets about the Stone case and other matters were making his job "impossible."

Separately, the Justice Department has begun reviewing the handling of the case against former national security adviser Michael Flynn, a person familiar with the matter said Friday.

On Friday, prosecutors notified McCabe's attorneys in a phone call and a letter that they were closing the case. The letter, signed by the chief of the office's public corruption unit, did not give a precise reason but said the decision was reached after "careful consideration" and "based on the totality of the circumstances and all of the information known to the government at this time."

McCabe's lawyers, Michael Bromwich and David Schertler, said they were gratified by the decision.

"At long last, justice has been done in this matter," the lawyers said in a statement. "We said at the outset of the criminal investigation, almost two years ago, that if the facts and the law determined the result, no charges would be brought."

Speaking Friday on CNN, where he works as a contributor, McCabe said it was an "absolute disgrace" that the investigation had taken so long and that he was relieved to be done with a process that he described as "so unbelievably tense."

Though federal prosecutors wrote that they consider the matter closed, Justice Department actions in the last few months have proven unpredictable, with a willingness to scrutinize or revisit decisions that had appeared resolved.

McCabe, a frequent target of Trump's attacks, has denied that he intentionally misled anyone. He has said his 2018 firing — for what the Justice Department called "lack of candor" — was politically motivated. He sued the Justice Department in August, saying officials had used the inspector general's conclusions as a pretext to rid the FBI of leaders Trump perceived as biased against him.

The decision is likely to further exacerbate tensions between Trump and Barr, who before speaking out in the television interview had privately complained to aides and the president himself that Trump's comments about the Justice Department were undercutting his political agenda and raising questions about the department's credibility. The White House was not given a heads-up about the decision beforehand, a person familiar with the matter said. The person spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss private conversations.

The moment came against a backdrop of growing anger from Trump at the Justice Department. The president has seethed that more of his political enemies have not been charged, included former FBI Director James Comey and his associates.

The president was particularly incensed no charges were filed over Comey's handling of memos about his interactions with Trump, a matter that was referred to the Justice Department for potential prosecution, according to a White House official and Republican close to the White House who weren't authorized to speak publicly about private discussions and spoke on condition of anonymity.

The president angrily denounced the decision and berated Barr over it, according to the officials. Aides expected that the decision not to charge McCabe could produce a similar eruption of rage. Trump did not

address the matter during a media appearance Friday.

Trump has also repeatedly complained about FBI Director Christopher Wray in recent months, saying he has not done enough to rid the bureau of people who are disloyal to Trump.

It was not immediately clear what had prompted a review of the Flynn case, though the person familiar with the matter said U.S. Attorney Jeff Jensen of St. Louis was working on it. The New York Times first reported Jensen's involvement.

The decision to spare McCabe criminal charges eliminates the prospect of a sensational trial that would have refocused public attention on the chaotic months of 2016, when the FBI was entangled in presidential politics through investigations touching both main contenders — Democrat Hillary Clinton and Trump, her Republican opponent.

The criminal investigation arose from an October 2016 story in The Wall Street Journal that described internal debates roiling the FBI and the Justice Department weeks before the presidential election about how aggressively the Clinton Foundation should be investigated. The article recounted a particularly tense phone call between McCabe and a senior Justice Department official.

The inspector general's report said McCabe told internal investigators that he had not authorized anyone at the FBI to speak with the reporter and that he did not know who did. The report said McCabe ultimately corrected that account and confirmed that he had encouraged the conversation with the reporter to counter a narrative that he thought was false.

McCabe has denied any wrongdoing and has said he was distracted by the tumult surrounding the FBI and the White House during the times he was questioned. One of the interviews took place the same day that Comey was fired.

"During these inquiries, I answered questions truthfully and as accurately as I could amidst the chaos that surrounded me," McCabe has said in a statement. "And when I thought my answers were misunderstood, I contacted investigators to correct them."

McCabe has been a target of Trump's attacks since even before he was elected, after news emerged in the fall of 2016 that McCabe's wife had accepted campaign contributions from a political action committee associated with ex-Virginia Gov. Terry McAuliffe during an unsuccessful run for the state Senate there.

Associated Press writer Jonathan Lemire contributed to this report.

Diversity test: 2020 Democrats seek their fortunes in Nevada

By MICHELLE L. PRICE Associated Press

LAS VEGAS (AP) — As the Democratic presidential race hurtles toward Nevada, candidates in the still-crowded field are jumping into their first test in a racially diverse state with solid union muscle and shaky plans for a presidential caucus.

Nevada has no obvious front-runner, though Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders heads into the contest on strong footing. The state has received only a sliver of the attention of the first two states on the primary calendar, Iowa and New Hampshire. Looking at the jumbled field, the state's most powerful union decided to take a pass on endorsing a candidate, rather than make a divisive choice or risk picking a loser. Most of the state's most prominent officials have stayed neutral.

The open race has every Democrat spending much of the next week searching for fortunes in the state's working-class neighborhoods, union halls, casino convention halls and stuccoed suburbs. For Sanders and former South Bend, Indiana, Mayor Pete Buttigieg, it's a chance to prove their staying power after strong finishes in Iowa and New Hampshire. For former Vice President Joe Biden and Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren, it could be a life preserver to rescue their bids after disappointing starts. For Minnesota Sen. Amy Klobuchar, it's a chance to prove her third-place finish in New Hampshire wasn't a fluke.

Candidates are making a get-out-the-vote push Saturday morning as early voting starts, and they plan to attend a Saturday night fundraising gala for the Las Vegas-based Clark County Democratic Party. Several candidates are making the hourlong flight up to Reno, a city newly flush with tech money and California

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transplants, and are due back in Las Vegas on Wednesday for the ninth Democratic debate.

This year, with the results of Iowa's caucuses muddled by technology and reporting problems, Nevada is under pressure to pull off a problem-free caucus. The Nevada State Democratic Party abandoned its original plans to use an app like the one that caused trouble in Iowa and has scrambled to come up with a new system to tabulate results.

The state party said this week that it will try to use simpler technology and a backup paper record, though election experts have warned that deploying new technology and processes without sufficient training can cause problems.

The party has been fortified and professionalized over the years by former Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid. The organizing force of the party and its allies is still referred to as the "Reid Machine," and many of his former staffers hold key roles on the presidential campaigns.

The 80-year-old former senator, who retired in 2016 and has been battling cancer, has repeatedly said he won't endorse before Nevada's caucuses. His decision not to back a candidate in the still-volatile field has been echoed by many of Nevada's top elected officials, including the governor, two Democratic senators and two of three Democratic members of the House.

The state's most powerful union also decided not to endorse. The 60,000-member casino workers' Culinary Union announced Thursday it would work instead to get out the vote and defeat President Donald Trump in 2020. The decision was a particular blow to Biden, who has long-standing ties to the union and needed an extra boost heading into Nevada.

While no candidate has earned its backing, the union hasn't been shy about discouraging support for Sanders and Warren, whose "Medicare For All" plans would move to a government-run insurance system. The union, which prizes the health care plans its members bargained hard for over the years, said its insurance would be doomed under Medicare for All.

Early on in the race, Biden seemed to have an advantage in Nevada, with early support in Nevada's communities of color and long ties to the state. He topped polls into early 2020, but Nevada polling has been scarce since voting in the race began.

"This is his chance to shine. He's put together a broad cross section of voters who support him," said Rep. Dina Titus, who represents Las Vegas and has endorsed Biden.

Andres Ramirez, a Democratic strategist in Las Vegas, said he hasn't seen Biden shine yet.

"I'm seeing less than I thought I would see from Biden," he said. "I just assumed I'd see more."

Democratic Rep. Steven Horsford, Nevada's lone black member of Congress, announced Friday he was backing Biden, saying in a statement that "Joe knows Nevada."

Although Sanders lost Nevada to Hillary Clinton four years ago, he's well situated this time. The Vermont senator has amassed an enormous campaign team that's topped 250 staff this week.

And while many candidates have reached out to Nevada's Latinos, who make up 29% of the state's population, Sanders has reached deep into Hispanic neighborhoods. He also has a well of support in northern Nevada and on college and university campuses.

Sanders' operation is also targeting voters in Nevada's far-flung places, with plans to bus voters to caucus sites. Barack Obama's 2008 win is often attributed to his focus on rural voters, who have extra influence in a complicated caucus system.

Kimi Cole, the chair of the Rural Nevada Democratic Caucus, said when it comes to hitting rural voters, "Sanders is more consistent, but Buttigieg is hitting it very, very hard."

"I talk to a lot of people who are just flat undecided at this point," Cole said.

Buttigieg didn't start building up his team in Nevada until August but has worked to catch up. He now has the second-biggest campaign in the state after Sanders, though he's still struggled to win over black and Hispanic voters.

Warren built up one of the first campaigns in the state, giving the Massachusetts senator's team more time to connect with Nevadans and try to get them to the polls. Klobuchar is still largely unknown in Nevada but has tried to build up a skeleton staff quickly.

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She held a late-night town hall at a downtown Las Vegas movie theater Thursday night, telling several hundred attendees that people have counted her out, but she's kept working.

"Talk to your friends. Say, 'You know what? That woman from Minnesota — she can do this. She can build this coalition. She needs your help. She needs our help.' So I'm asking you to do that. Call everyone you know," Klobuchar said.

While billionaire philanthropist Tom Steyer fared poorly in Iowa and New Hampshire, he could be a contender in Nevada, where he's blanketed the state with ads and billboards. Steyer's past political activism established some connections for him in the state, but it's unclear whether his smaller campaign staff can convert the name recognition into votes.

Clark County Commissioner Tick Segerblom, who is backing Sanders, said he thinks his candidate is going to come in first or second in the state, but Steyer could surprise people and do better than expected.

"He's spent a lot of time and money educating and bringing people in," Segerblom said.

With Sanders trying to consolidate the most liberal voters, "our real battle is with Warren," Segerblom said. He then amended that statement, saying, "It's not a battle because we're on the same side."

The other billionaire in the race, former New York City Mayor Mike Bloomberg, failed to file in time for Nevada's caucuses and isn't eligible to receive votes.

Associated Press writer Sara Burnett in Chicago contributed to this report.

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

Freezing weather compounds crisis for displaced in Syria

By SARAH EL DEEB and ZEINA KARAM Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — A military offensive on an opposition-controlled region of northwestern Syria has created one of the worst catastrophes for civilians in the country's long-running war, sending hundreds of thousands of people fleeing, many of them sleeping in open fields and under trees in freezing temperatures.

The military campaign in Idlib province and the nearby Aleppo countryside has also killed hundreds of civilians, and a bitter winter has compounded the pain.

The weather has contributed to at least 10 deaths, including four who suffered hypothermia, a family of four that died of suffocation in their tent and two who burned to death when their tent caught fire, according to Mohammed Hallaj, a coordinator for the area's Response Coordination Group.

Nizar Hamadi, 43, lost his brother and three other family members, including a three-year old. Their family had been displaced multiple times to escape the swift government offensive, ending up in a settlement made up of rudimentary tents stitched together with sticks and cloth.

"It was God's destiny that it was really cold. The temperatures was no less than -8 or -9 (degrees Celsius, 15 degrees Fahrenheit) and this is rare in Syria," he said, speaking to The Associated Press from the Idlib town of Binnish.

He said his brother, Steif Abdel-Razak Hamadi, had moved north as Binnish also came under attack to set up his family's next shelter in Killi. On Tuesday, he set up a coal heater and by nightfall, as the fire died down, he moved it inside the tent and went to sleep with his family including his wife, two children and his grandchild.

"For the whole night, the heater was sucking out all the oxygen in the tent," Hamadi said.

When the son sleeping in another tent woke up and came to their tent, he found them all dead.

The government's Russian-backed assault on Idlib, the Syrian opposition's last stronghold, has uprooted more than 830,000 people since Dec. 1, most of them fleeing toward safer areas near the border with Turkey, U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric said Friday. At least 143,000 people have been displaced in the last three days.

"Humanitarian needs are increasing exponentially," Dujarric said. "The ongoing emergency compounds the already dire humanitarian situation for people in the northwest, who have been made vulnerable by

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years of crisis, violence, economic downturn and, of course, multiple displacements," Dujarric said.

Terrified families piled on trucks and vehicles, sitting on top of mattresses and blankets, clogging sludgy rural roads in harrowing scenes of exodus that have been recurrent in Syria's conflict, now in its ninth year.

Around half the territory's population had already been displaced from other parts of Syria, so formal camps are full.

"It's cold, it's snowing and our life is terrible, we can't take this cold and neither can the kids," said a woman, who identified herself by her nickname Um Muhammad, who recently fled and was staying at a tent camp near the Turkish border.

"This life, what can I say? We are broken now. I am an old woman with kids, no one is taking care of us," she said, her face wrapped up in big black scarf against the cold.

The fighting has killed 1,700 people since last April, and the latest military campaign is disrupting aid operations, according to the United Nations. As of Feb. 11, at least 72 health facilities have suspended services due to insecurity or mass displacement, it says.

The U.N. Security Council held a closed meeting Friday on the escalating violence in Idlib at the request of its European Union members — France, Germany, Belgium and Estonia along with former member Poland.

Afterward, the five EU nations issued a statement expressing alarm at the military escalation and demanding an immediate end to the attacks.

"This is one of the worst man-made displacements that we have seen anywhere in the world in years. And it has been and continues to be entirely avoidable," the five EU nations said in the statement.

The United Nations World Food Programme said it was forced to temporarily stop food distributions because the recent upsurge in hostilities disrupted the movement of trucks carrying supplies into the region from Turkey.

In the camps, refugees dig up mud from their flooded tent, others dust off the snow dumped by unusually cold spell. New trucks pull up with new arrivals, and mattresses piled on top.

Hooriya Al-Essa, a camp resident who arrived with his family last month from the Idlib countryside, said they lacked heaters, blankets, mattresses and firewood.

"Our situation is very bad. This entire camp is poor. We have nothing. We need help — money, heating, blankets, mattresses," he said, standing next to a snow-covered tent.

On Friday, a government helicopter was shot down and its crew killed amid the fighting in Idlib. It was the second helicopter shot down in a week. Another government helicopter gunship was downed three days earlier, near the village of Nairab.

Videos posted online Friday showed a helicopter spiraling downward from the sky, with flames trailing behind as onlookers cheered.

A military official told Syrian state media that the helicopter was hit by a "hostile rocket" in the western countryside of Aleppo province. The unnamed official said the helicopter crashed and its crew was killed. Turkey-backed opposition fighters claimed responsibility, saying it was hit in response to the Syrian army's indiscriminate targeting of civilians.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which has a network of activists on the ground, said the helicopter was downed Friday in the village of Qibtan al-Jebel, north of Aleppo city. It said two crew members were killed and their bodies were found near the site of the crash.

The Observatory said the helicopter was downed Friday by Turkish military forces stationed in the opposition-held region. There was no immediate comment from Turkey.

Insurgents have sought to acquire portable defense systems to target government warplanes, often acquiring them from seized stockpiles or from outside supporters.

Turkey, a backer of Syria's opposition, has been deploying equipment and troops in the region, which is home to more than 3 million people, in an attempt to halt the Syrian military's advances.

But the increased Turkish footprint has also resulted in confrontations with the Syrian troops and clashes between the two sides have killed 13 Turkish military personnel and 13 Syrian troops.

Associated Press writer Suzan Fraser in Ankara, Turkey, contributed to this report.

Michael Avenatti is convicted of trying to extort Nike

By LARRY NEUMEISTER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Michael Avenatti, the combative lawyer who gained fame by representing porn star Stormy Daniels in lawsuits involving President Donald Trump, was convicted Friday of trying to extort sportswear giant Nike.

The verdict was returned by a federal jury in Manhattan following a three-week trial in which prosecutors said Avenatti threatened to use his media access to hurt Nike's reputation and stock price unless the company paid him up to \$25 million.

The convictions for attempted extortion and honest services fraud carry a combined potential penalty of 42 years in prison.

Avenatti glared at the jurors as the verdict was being announced but said nothing.

Afterward, he shook hands with his lawyers and told them "great job" before he was led back to the cell where he has been held since a judge found he had violated his bail conditions.

His lawyer, Scott Srebnick, said he would appeal the conviction. A judge set sentencing for June.

"We are all obviously deeply disappointed by the jury's verdict. We believe there are substantial legal grounds for the appeal that he plans to pursue," Srebnick said in an email.

"Michael Avenatti has been a fighter his entire life. The inhumane conditions of solitary confinement he has endured over the past month would break anyone but he remains strong," Srebnick said.

The jury agreed with prosecutors who argued that Avenatti misused a client's information "in an effort to extort tens of millions of dollars" from Nike, U.S. Attorney Geoffrey S. Berman said in a written statement.

"While the defendant may have tried to hide behind legal terms and a suit and tie, the jury clearly saw the defendant's scheme for what it was — an old fashioned shakedown," he said.

At trial, lawyers for Nike used words like "shakedown" and "stickup" to describe what they felt they were subject to when Avenatti threatened to stage a news conference to muddy Nike's name by linking the company to a college basketball scandal.

Avenatti, 48, became a cable news fixture in 2018 and 2019 as journalists courted him for information about Daniels and her claims of a tryst with Trump before he became president, and a payoff to remain silent about it. At his peak of notoriety, Avenatti used Twitter and TV appearances to relentlessly criticize Trump and even considered running for president himself.

At least one critic lashed out after Avenatti's conviction, recalling that Avenatti once sent a tweet labeling U.S. Sen. Ben Sasse, a Nebraska Republican and occasional Trump critic, a "one man moron who knows nothing about the law or the SCOTUS," the acronym for the Supreme Court.

"Michael Avenatti is a D-list attorney but a Grade-A scumbag," Sasse said in a release. "It's hard to get airtime from the slammer, so Nike's win is cable television's loss. In the end, Michael Avenatti wasn't a real attorney, he just played one on TV."

Many of Avenatti's television appearances occurred while he was representing Daniels and after the arrest of Trump's personal lawyer, Michael Cohen. Cohen is serving a three-year prison sentence after pleading guilty to lying to Congress and campaign finance violations in connection with hush payments to Daniels and another woman who claimed an affair with Trump.

After Avenatti's conviction, Donald Trump Jr. said in a tweet: "I look forward to Michael's witty twitter retorts to the jury that just found him guilty in all counts. Though I'm told he is still doing well amongst the Democrat primary contenders."

The president's son also sent a tweet with snippets of some of Avenatti's television appearances and suggested the media loved Avenatti.

Avenatti's fall was swift. He was arrested as he was about to meet Nike lawyers last March to press his demands for millions of dollars to conduct an internal probe of the Beaverton, Oregon-based apparel maker. Evidence at trial showed Avenatti owed at least \$11 million at the time and had been evicted from

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his law offices for failure to pay rent that totaled roughly \$50,000 a month.

Avenatti maintained he was taking the aggressive position at the urging of his client Gary Franklin, who ran a youth basketball league in Los Angeles and was angry that Nike ended a decade-long sponsorship that provided \$72,000 annually and free gear. He sought \$1.5 million for Franklin, as well.

Franklin testified that two Nike executives forced him to pay money to the mother of an elite high school basketball player and to pass along payments to the handlers of other players while doctoring paperwork to hide the purpose of the funds.

Franklin said he felt betrayed by Avenatti after he learned the lawyer was demanding millions of dollars for himself and another lawyer. He also said he would not have approved of Avenatti threatening to smear Nike's name, since he wanted to repair his relationship with the company.

"Scared, upset, confused" was how Franklin said he reacted to Avenatti telling him that he was "going to go public" with what he knew about Nike executives.

As Franklin testified, Avenatti showed his displeasure. He laughed, grimaced, looked skyward, smiled and shook his head in reaction to his former client's testimony.

Avenatti did not testify, but his lawyers said he was following the wishes of Franklin and an entertainment executive who advised him to be aggressive to force Nike to fire corrupt executives and fix its culture.

Besides the extortion trial, Avenatti also faces an April trial in New York on charges that he defrauded Daniels of book proceeds and a May trial in Los Angeles on charges that he defrauded clients and others of millions of dollars.

The judge presiding over the trial over book proceeds died this month. The judge newly assigned to the case has scheduled a conference for Feb. 25.

Avenatti remains held without bail. Federal prosecutors in Los Angeles succeeded last month in getting him locked up after saying he violated his \$300,000 bail by moving money around illegally after his arrest.

US and Taliban agree to truce, way forward in Afghanistan

By **MATTHEW LEE** and **KATHY GANNON** Associated Press

MUNICH (AP) — The United States and the Taliban have agreed to a temporary truce that, if successful, would open the way for a deal that would bring American troops home from Afghanistan and end 18 years of war.

The peace deal would call for negotiations between Afghans on both sides of the conflict to start next month, an eventual countrywide cease-fire and a commitment from the Taliban not to harbor terrorist groups like al Qaida, while setting a timetable for the withdrawal of U.S. troops.

The truce marks a milestone in efforts to end America's longest-running conflict and fulfill President Donald Trump's campaign pledge to bring U.S. troops home from foreign conflicts. But prospects for a real and lasting peace remain unclear.

Details were provided separately Friday by a senior U.S. official and a Taliban official, who were not authorized to publicly discuss the matter and spoke on the condition of anonymity.

The U.S. official said the agreement for a seven-day "reduction in violence" is "very specific" and covers the entire country, including Afghan government forces. There were indications a formal announcement could come as early as the weekend.

The official said the Taliban had committed to a halt in roadside and suicide bombings as well as rocket attacks. If the Taliban uphold their commitments, a U.S.-Taliban peace agreement would be signed within 10 days.

The Taliban official said the signing had been tentatively set for Feb. 29, with the start of the Afghan talks planned for March 10. The official said Germany and Norway have offered to host the talks but there has been no decision on the venue.

That Taliban official said the agreement would provide for the release of 5,000 Taliban prisoners before the start of the negotiations.

Much will depend on the results of the all-Afghan negotiations, if and when they get off the ground.

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The presence of “spoilers” — those happy with the status quo — will remain a threat to peace efforts throughout the process, the U.S. senior official acknowledged.

Also uncertain are the gains made for Afghan women and girls since the fall of the Taliban months after the U.S. military response to the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks ordered by Osama bin Laden from Afghan soil.

But, for the Taliban, the proposal represents a way to gain the political legitimacy they never had in the late 1990s when they first came to power.

The new developments came as U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Defense Secretary Mark Esper met Friday with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani on the sidelines of an international security forum in Munich.

To make good on its promise to release Taliban prisoners, Washington is going to need the cooperation of Ghani, who has been critical of the way U.S. envoy Zalmay Khalilzad has conducted the talks with the Taliban, complaining about being kept in the dark.

Ghani has also bickered with his partner in the current Unity Government, Abdullah Abdullah, over who will represent Kabul at the negotiating table. Ghani has insisted he lead the talks, while his political opponents and other prominent Afghans have called for more inclusive representation at the negotiating table.

The Taliban and those familiar with the details of the Afghan negotiations say the representatives from Kabul will include government officials but they will sit across from the Taliban as ordinary Afghans and not as government representatives.

U.S. officials have not publicly spelled out their timetable for an initial drawdown of U.S. troops in Afghanistan, but the expectation is that a reduction from the current total of about 12,000 to approximately 8,600 will begin after the signing of a U.S.-Taliban deal. That initial reduction is likely to stretch out over a period of weeks or months.

The Taliban official said the withdrawal of foreign troops would start gradually and be carried out over 18 months.

A senior U.S. military officer told a small group of reporters that U.S. counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan against the Islamic State group and al-Qaida will continue, separate from the truce agreement. The official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive aspects of military operations ahead of an expected announcement of the U.S.-Taliban deal.

He also said the United States has sufficient intelligence-gathering assets to be able to determine within the seven-day period whether the Taliban is making a good-faith effort to reduce violence, even if some limited violence persists.

Army Secretary Ryan McCarthy on Friday called the U.S. agreement a first step in the process.

“It’s going to take several weeks for this to unfold, but it’s very encouraging that we’re heading down a path to a political solution,” he said in response to a question during remarks at the National Press Club.

A truce had been widely anticipated, and Trump agreed in principle to the deal, according to U.S. officials.

The final details were hammered out in recent days by Khalilzad and Taliban representatives in Doha, Qatar. Khalilzad also was in Munich and attended Pompeo and Esper’s meeting, as did Gen. Scott Miller, the commander of the U.S.-led international force in Afghanistan.

Gannon reported from Islamabad. AP National Security Writer Robert Burns and Associated Press writer Lolita C. Baldor in Washington contributed to this report.

Migrants cross Yemen war zone to find work in Saudi Arabia

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.

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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 payment 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

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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.

"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

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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 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.

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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.

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-Raqa.

Souq al-Raqa 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.

Prosecutor: Weinstein saw victims as 'complete disposables'

By MICHAEL R. SISAK and TOM HAYS Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Harvey Weinstein considered himself such a big shot in Hollywood that he thought he could get away with treating aspiring actresses like "complete disposables," a prosecutor told a jury in closing arguments Friday at his New York City rape trial.

"The universe is run by me, and therefore, they don't get to complain when they are stepped on, spit on, demoralized and, yes, raped and abused by me — the king," Assistant District Attorney Joan Illuzzi-Orbon said, mimicking Weinstein.

Using a TV monitor next to the jury box, the prosecutors displayed photos of "Sopranos" actress Annabella Sciorra and five other accusers who also testified. Illuzzi told jurors that, putting aside the more successful Sciorra, who dined with Uma Thurman and dated Gary Oldman, the women were viewed by Weinstein as "complete disposables."

"These other women, they were never in his world," Illuzzi said. "They are never going to be in his world. They are never going to be strong enough, bold enough or brave enough to tell. But Annabella — someone might believe her."

Illuzzi also showed a side-by-side comparison of Sciorra's testimony about confronting Weinstein in the mid-1990s — after she accuses him of raping her — and similar testimony by the woman he's charged with raping in 2013 about how the mogul reacted when she told him she had a boyfriend.

"His eyes went black and I thought he was going to hit me right there," Sciorra testified. With the click of a button, the rape accuser's testimony popped up: "His eyes changed and he was not there. They were very black and he ripped me up."

At times, Weinstein sat back in his chair staring ahead at a screen in front of the defense table that mirrored what was being shown to the seven men and five women on the jury.

After sitting through the three-hour summation, Manhattan District Attorney Cyrus Vance Jr. shot reporters a thumbs up. Meanwhile, Weinstein's lawyers said the film producer was confident, heading into the long weekend before the start of deliberations Tuesday.

"The evidence is all on our side," Weinstein's lawyer Donna Rotunno said.

Illuzzi's closing comes a day after Rotunno offered an epic, hourslong defense closing argument, painting the prosecution's case as a "sinister tale" absent proof needed to convict Weinstein.

Prosecutors created an "alternate universe" that "strips adult women of common sense, autonomy and responsibility," Rotunno argued.

"Regret does not exist in this world, only regret renamed as rape," she said.

Illuzzi pushed back Friday as she described Mimi Haley's allegations that Weinstein held her down on the bed and forcibly performed oral sex on her in his SoHo apartment in 2006.

"When an adult goes to another adult's home, should they expect that they are going to have to engage in sex?" the prosecutor asked.

"By going to Harvey Weinstein's home, did she deserve what she got?"

"There are no blurred lines here," she added. "This is a crime."

Weinstein, 67, is charged with raping a woman in a Manhattan hotel room in 2013 and forcibly performing oral sex on Haley in 2006. Jurors can consider Sciorra's allegation in weighing charges alleging that Weinstein is a sexual predator, even though it is too old to be charged on its own.

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

Other accusers testified as part of a prosecution effort to show he used the same tactics to victimize many women over the years.

In response to defense claims that Haley and the woman he's charged with raping were opportunists who had consensual sex with Weinstein because they thought it would help their careers, prosecutors are seeking to focus the jury's attention on harrowing accounts alleging rapes, forced oral sex, groping, masturbation, lewd propositions and casting-couch experiences.

Some 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.

The prosecution's task has been complicated because the women he is charged with raping kept in contact with Weinstein after the alleged encounters. But Illuzzi said part of his scheme was to keep in contact with them so he could point to those encounters as evidence nothing happened, essentially "preparing for a moment just like this."

Case in point, she said: In October 2017, Weinstein replied to an email from a publicist giving him a heads up that Sciorra was about to go public by writing: "Annabella did cop land."

That was a reference to a 1997 Weinstein-produced movie that Sciorra acted in. She said she didn't realize when auditioning that his studio was involved.

Instructing his publicist on how to respond to the article, Weinstein wrote: "this was consensual or deny it." "I submit to you that was a confession," Illuzzi told jurors over the defense's denied objection.

On Twitter, follow Michael Sisak at twitter.com/mikesisak and Tom Hays at twitter.com/aptomhays

For more coverage visit apnews.com/HarveyWeinstein

AP Exclusive: Agency memo contradicts Greyhound on bus raids

By GENE JOHNSON Associated Press

SEATTLE (AP) — A Customs and Border Protection memo obtained by The Associated Press confirms that bus companies such as Greyhound do not have to allow Border Patrol agents on board to conduct routine checks for immigrants in the country illegally, which is contrary to the company's long insistence that it has no choice but to do so.

Greyhound, the nation's largest bus carrier, has said it does not like the agents coming on board, but it has nevertheless permitted them, claiming federal law demanded it. When provided with the memo by the AP, the company declined to say whether it would change that practice.

Greyhound has faced pressure from the American Civil Liberties Union, immigrant rights activists and Washington state Attorney General Bob Ferguson to stop allowing sweeps on buses within 100 miles (160 kilometers) of an international border or coastline.

They say the practice is intimidating and discriminatory and has become more common under President Donald Trump. Border Patrol arrests videotaped by other passengers have sparked criticism, and Greyhound faces a lawsuit in California alleging that it violated consumer protection laws by facilitating raids.

Some other bus companies, including Jefferson Lines, which operates in 14 states, and MTRWestern, which

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operates in the Pacific Northwest, have made clear that they do not consent to agents boarding buses. The memo obtained by the AP was dated Jan. 28, addressed to all chief patrol agents and signed by then-Border Patrol Chief Carla Provost just before she retired. It confirms the legal position that Greyhound's critics have taken: that the Constitution's Fourth Amendment prevents agents from boarding buses and questioning passengers without a warrant or the consent of the company.

"When transportation checks occur on a bus at non-checkpoint locations, the agent must demonstrate that he or she gained access to the bus with the consent of the company's owner or one of the company's employees," the memo states. An agent's actions while on the bus "would not cause a reasonable person to believe that he or she is unable to terminate the encounter with the agent."

Border Patrol officials have previously said agents do seek the consent of the bus driver before boarding and questioning passengers. Bill Kingsford, the operations officer for the Border Patrol's Spokane, Washington, sector, said Thursday that before the memo he had never seen that policy in writing.

In response to criticism over the past two years, Greyhound has said that it does not support or "consent" to the bus searches, but that federal law left it no choice. The company said the immigration sweeps make for delays, missed buses and unhappy customers.

Greyhound's parent company, FirstGroup PLC, said last summer: "We are required by federal law to comply with the requests of federal agents. To suggest we have lawful choice in the matter is tendentious and false."

Greyhound said that it appreciated the Border Patrol "clarifying" its policy. "We were unaware of USBP's memo clarifying their practices regarding transportation and bus check operations," the company said. "We are pleased there appears to be greater context about these practices as we have publicly stated we do not consent to these searches and maintain that position."

The statement said it would continue to request guidance from the Border Patrol. "Our goal is to ensure that our passengers and drivers feel safe and secure when riding with us, and we'll continue to make that our top priority."

Advocates said the memo could give them additional leverage.

"This puts the pressure on Greyhound," said Matt Adams, legal director of the Northwest Immigrant Rights Project. "Are you going to stand up and protect your customers or are you going to collaborate with the government and turn over your passengers to the Border Patrol?"

ACLU chapters in 10 states — California, Washington, Vermont, New York, New Hampshire, Michigan, Florida, Maine, Texas and Arizona — wrote to Greyhound in 2018 to express their concern with passengers being pulled off buses and arrested. In several cases, they said, it appeared passengers had been singled out and questioned based on having dark skin or foreign accents.

The Border Patrol denies that, saying all passengers are questioned.

"Greyhound must take a firm stance — issue a public statement, add signage to buses and stations, train and empower employees, etc. — to make it abundantly clear that the company as a whole does not consent to these searches," said Andrea Flores, deputy director of policy at the ACLU's Equality Division.

Washington's state's Democratic attorney general has threatened legal action, saying that Greyhound's acquiescence to the Border Patrol causes travel delays as well as alarm and confusion for patrons — in potential violation of state consumer protection law. He asked Greyhound last year to take several steps, including posting stickers on its buses notifying the Border Patrol that it does not consent to searches, but the company has so far declined to do so.

Other bus companies contacted by the attorney general's office have placed stickers on their doors noting that the company does not consent to searches or have given drivers placards to hand to agents explaining the refusal.

"This memo is consistent with what my office has been saying all along to Greyhound," Ferguson said in a statement. "Unfortunately, Greyhound continues to demonstrate indifference to the legal rights of its customers. If Greyhound refuses to recognize their legal obligations, then we will be forced to take action."

Under then-President Barack Obama, Customs and Border Protection in late 2011 began cutting back on so-called "transportation checks," especially along the U.S.-Canada border, amid criticism that it amounted

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to racial profiling. The agency told agents to keep away from bus and train stations entirely unless they had "actionable intelligence" about someone who had recently entered the country illegally. It also said such operations had to be cleared with Border Patrol headquarters in Washington, D.C.

The Trump administration returned authority to the chief agents in each Border Patrol sector to approve the operations, and they have been on the rise, the agency says.

In a statement, the CBP said that "enforcement operations" are routine at transportation hubs and "are performed consistent with law and in direct support of immediate border enforcement efforts."

"The U.S. Border Patrol conducts regular outreach with transportation companies to foster good working relationships," the statement said.

The agency has especially faced criticism for conducting the checks on buses far from the border. In Spokane, just under 100 miles (160 kilometers) from Canada, arrests at the city's bus depot rose from 35 in 2017 to 84 last year, according to data obtained by the University of Washington's Center for Human Rights. Bus routes there run east and west and don't cross the border.

Among those detained in Spokane last year was Portland, Oregon, comedian Mohanad Elshieky, who was removed from a Greyhound bus as he returned home from a performance. Elshieky, a Libyan citizen who was granted asylum in the U.S., said he was detained for 20 minutes, even though he had two forms of identification showing that he was in the country legally.

Elshieky's attorneys sued the government for false arrest in a federal lawsuit Friday. At the time of the detention, CBP said Elshieky should have been carrying different identification to prove his immigration status. The agency said it does not comment on pending litigation.

Amid coronavirus fears, a second wave of flu hits US kids

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — A second wave of flu is hitting the U.S., turning this into one of the nastiest seasons for children in a decade.

The number of child deaths and the hospitalization rate for youngsters are the highest seen at this point in any season since the severe flu outbreak of 2009-10, health officials said Friday. And the wave is expected to keep going for weeks.

Experts say it is potentially a bad time for an extended flu season, given concerns about the new coronavirus out of China, which can cause symptoms that can be difficult to distinguish from flu without testing.

If coronavirus were to begin spreading in the U.S., there could be confusion about whether people are getting sick with it or the flu, said Dr. William Schaffner, an infectious-diseases expert at Vanderbilt University.

This flu season got off to its earliest start in 15 years, with surges of flu-like illnesses seen in parts of the South as early as October. Most cases were caused by a type of flu that usually causes substantial infections only in the spring, at the tail end of the flu season.

That wave peaked in late December and dropped steadily for weeks afterward.

But a second surge began in late January. Last week saw another rise in the percentage of doctor's office visits that were due to flu-like illness, according to the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

"We have not yet peaked for influenza. We are still on our way up," Dr. David Weber, a University of North Carolina infectious-diseases specialist, said of the patient traffic in Chapel Hill.

Overall, the CDC estimated that 26 million Americans have gotten sick with flu this past fall and winter, with about 250,000 flu-related hospitalizations and around 14,000 deaths.

The viruses behind both waves can be hard on children and young adults. But they aren't considered as dangerous to retirement-age people -- good news, since most flu deaths and hospitalizations each winter occur in the elderly.

In fact, the overall death and hospitalization rates this season are not high "because we haven't seen the elderly as involved in this flu season," said the CDC's Lynnette Brammer.

But 92 flu-related deaths have already been reported in children, a higher total at this point of the year than in any season in the past decade. And the hospitalization rates also are far higher than what's been

seen at this point.

The CDC said the reason is that two strains of the flu that are tough on children are spreading in the same season.

The health agency is expected to release an estimate next week of how effective the flu vaccine has been.

So far, only 15 U.S. cases of the coronavirus have been confirmed, and no deaths. All but two of the cases were in people who had traveled to Wuhan, China, the epicenter of the international outbreak. The remaining two were spread from travelers to their spouses.

Schaffner said that for the time being, it is easy to determine a likely coronavirus case by asking about a patient's travel history.

It's possible that concern about the coronavirus has led some people with flu symptoms to go to the doctor for testing this year, whereas they might have just stayed home in other years, Brammer said. But there is nothing in CDC data that shows that's been happening, she added.

Still, it's OK if it does happen, said the CDC's Dr. Nancy Messonnier.

"People being a little worried and seeking care doesn't especially worry me, because that's the point. We're looking for broader spread within the community," she said.

To that end, health officials will be using five public health labs that usually test for flu to start checking also for coronavirus. The labs are in Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco and Seattle. When a specimen tests negative for flu, it will then be tested for coronavirus, Messonnier said.

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."

Though her mother accepted her, Gómez said she was tormented by discrimination after assuming the

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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.

Virus cases rise as experts question China's numbers

By KEN MORITSUGU Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — Infections and deaths from the new virus in China ballooned for a second straight day Friday, on paper at least, as officials near the epicenter of the outbreak struggled to keep up with a backlog of patients' lab work.

The acceleration in cases was not necessarily an indicator of a surge in the illness known as COVID-19 because the hardest-hit province of Hubei and its capital of Wuhan changed the way it counted cases. But public health experts wrestled with what exactly could be deduced from the numbers given the shift in approach.

"If you change the way you count cases, that obviously confounds our capacity to draw firm conclusions about the effectiveness of the quarantine," said Dr. William Schaffner, an infectious disease expert

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at Vanderbilt University in the United States. "We have to interpret the numbers with great caution."

Confirmed cases of the virus rose to 63,851 in mainland China, an increase of 5,090 from a day earlier, according to the National Health Commission. The death toll stood at 1,380, up 121.

Still, the World Health Organization continued to report lower numbers, standing by the way cases were counted before Hubei's shift. WHO pressed for more details Friday on the change in tabulating cases. Doctors in Hubei are now making diagnoses based on symptoms, patient history and chest X-rays instead of waiting for laboratory confirmation.

"We're seeking further clarity on how clinical diagnoses are being made to ensure other respiratory illnesses including influenza are not getting mixed into the COVID-19 data," said WHO director general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

Meantime, the vulnerability of health workers responding to the epidemic was crystalized with other data emerging from China. More than 1,700 medical workers in China have contracted COVID-19 and six have died, according to the health commission, which said it was "highly concerned" by the infections.

WHO echoed that, with Tedros saying more information was needed on when the workers were infected and under what circumstances. Transmissions to front-line health workers can signal problems in infection control policies and signal that a disease is becoming more easily transmissible.

Schaffner said he was optimistic that China's unprecedented quarantines — putting 60 million people in its hardest-hit cities under lockdown — would help reduce transmissions. But without consistent numbers, he said, it was hard to draw any such conclusion.

"China and the world community would like to restore a sense of normalcy but in order to do that we need to have confidence in what is going on and we're not there yet," Schaffner said.

China has come under intense criticism within the country for its response to the crisis and has been the target of complaints from elsewhere too. But WHO's chief of emergencies, Dr. Michael Ryan, defended China's handling of the outbreak and its cooperation with others.

"From our perspective, we have a government that's cooperating with us, that's inviting in international experts, that's shared sequences with the world, that continues to engage with the outside community," he said.

The vast majority of cases are in China but reverberations from the outbreak were felt around the world, with hundreds of infections reported elsewhere.

More than 580 cases have been confirmed outside mainland China, including the first infection on the African continent, reported Friday in Egypt. Experts and African leaders have expressed concern that should the virus spread there, it might wreak havoc among less developed countries with fewer health resources.

There have been three fatalities, in the Philippines, Hong Kong and Japan.

Associated Press writers Matt Sedensky in New York; Maria Cheng in London; Ralph Jennings in Taipei, Taiwan; and Mari Yamaguchi in Tokyo contributed to this report.

Father Josh: A married Catholic priest in a celibate world

By **TIM SULLIVAN** Associated Press

DALLAS (AP) — The priest wakes up at 4 a.m. on the days he celebrates the early Mass, sipping coffee and enjoying the quiet while his young children sleep in rooms awash in stuffed animals and Sesame Street dolls and pictures of saints. Then he kisses his wife goodbye and drives through the empty suburban streets of north Dallas to the church he oversees.

In a Catholic world where debates over clerical celibacy have flared from Brazil to the Vatican, Joshua Whitfield is that rarest of things: A married Catholic priest.

The Roman Catholic church has demanded celibacy of its priests since the Middle Ages, calling it a "spiritual gift" that enables men to devote themselves fully to the church. But as a shortage of priests becomes a crisis in parts of the world, liberal wings in the church have been arguing that it's time to reassess that stance. On Wednesday, Pope Francis sidestepped the latest debate on celibacy, releasing an

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eagerly awaited document that avoided any mention of recommendations by Latin American bishops to consider ordaining married men in the Amazon, where believers can go months without seeing a priest.

Even the most liberal of popes have refused to change the tradition.

It is "the mark of a heroic soul and the imperative call to unique and total love for Christ and His Church," Pope Paul VI wrote in 1967.

Then there's Josh Whitfield.

Whitfield is a husband, a father of four and a relentlessly good-natured priest beloved by the parishioners at Dallas' St. Rita Catholic Community. His life is spent juggling two worlds. He celebrates Mass, he hears confessions; he drives his son to karate practice, he encourages his oldest daughter's love of baseball. He is, he says, "an ecclesiastical zoo exhibit," one of the tiny community of married priests — men who slipped through a clerical loophole created 40 years ago — that even most Catholics don't know exist.

But inside St. Rita, he's just Father Josh.

"It's people like you who are interested in married priests. Here at St. Rita we just get on with it. My job is just to do the tasks the bishop has given me as best I can, and try and make it work," he said in an interview in his book-filled office, where photos of his wife and children vie for space with photos of popes and sketches of his religious heroes.

There are around 125 married Roman Catholic priests like Whitfield, an Episcopal convert, across the U.S., experts say, and perhaps a couple hundred total around the world.

Surveys of Catholics show widespread backing for a married priesthood. A series of reports in recent years by the Pew Research Center showing 62 percent support among U.S. Catholics, 56 percent among Brazilians — the world's most populous Catholic nation — and 63 percent in Central and Eastern Europe.

One reason behind that is a church facing an immense, and growing, shortage of priests. In the U.S., the number of priests has dropped by more than one-third since 1970, falling to less than 37,000 in 2018, even as America's Catholic population has jumped from 54 million to 74 million, according to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate. Worldwide, the number of priests has remained fairly stable over the past 50 years — but the Catholic population has doubled to 1.3 billion.

But there's one very small, very notable Catholic constituency that mostly doesn't support opening up the priesthood to married men: Married priests themselves.

"So many of the married priests, like myself, hold this sort of strange, almost contradictory position. And I get that it's hard to understand. But that's sort of the irritating beauty of Catholicism. The church persistently thinks theologically, and not sociologically and not politically, at her best," said Whitfield.

The Catholic Church, which includes nearly two dozen rites, allows married priests in its Eastern Rite churches. It also allows in some married priests like Whitfield, a former Episcopal priest who converted to Catholicism with his wife, Alli, in 2009 and was ordained as a Catholic priest three years later.

While married priests were common in Christianity's first centuries, the Latin Rite — the largest of Catholicism's branches, and the dominant rite in the West — has enforced a tradition of a celibate priesthood since the 11th century, in part as a way to keep priests' assets inside the church, instead of being passed to their heirs. It's also in part a way to keep down costs, since maintaining a family is more expensive.

Pope Francis has walked a careful line on celibacy, noting that it is a tradition, not theological dogma, and as a result is open to change. His statements range from the clear-cut — "I don't agree to allow optional celibacy, no" — to the more nuanced, saying married priests might be allowed "when there is a pastoral necessity" in remote areas with dire clerical shortages.

That possibility worries conservatives and thrills liberals, both of whom believe that allowing married priests in such areas as Amazonia or the Pacific Islands could crack open the door to a married clergy.

Whitfield, 41, became a Catholic priest in 2012 through the Pastoral Provision, a set of rules crafted by Pope John Paul II in 1980 that gives married Episcopal priests who have converted to Catholicism the chance to apply for ordination in the Catholic church.

The process, which can take years, includes everything from psychological interviews to exams on Catholic theology and, in the end, a special dispensation from the pope.

The convert priests see themselves as narrow exceptions to centuries of Catholic rules, part of a drive

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in the Catholic church to reunite with some branches of Anglicanism. They live with special restrictions, including that they cannot become bishops. They also cannot remarry if their wives die, and must spend the rest of their priestly lives as celibates.

Many of the married converts had become disenchanted with the Episcopal church as they watched it grow increasingly liberal in recent decades, amid bitter battles over such issues as women priests and gay marriage. Ironically, they often find themselves heroes to liberal Catholics, who see them as a modernizing force in the church.

"We are these very conservative men who have left the Episcopal church and now meet all these left-wing Catholics who are celebrating our presence," said Father Paul Sullins, a married priest, father of three and longtime professor at Catholic University. "It can be uncomfortable at times, but we try to love each other."

Deborah Rose-Milavec, of the Catholic advocacy group FutureChurch, is one of those progressives.

"Whatever their politics on marriage, by the way they live their lives they show it's entirely possible to have a married clergy. They are effective in their ministry. They can say Mass and raise kids. They can administer the sacraments and have a family."

Sullins acknowledges that married priests like himself could eventually lead to others.

"We could be the vanguard someday, even if we don't want to be the vanguard," he said.

Whitfield, who left the Episcopal church in part because he was alienated by the bitterness of its divisions, and felt called to the traditionalism and obedience of Catholicism, avoids debates about celibacy.

"You would think I would have a strong opinion one way or the other," he said. He believes celibacy should be the norm. But if the church decides to allow married priests "then I'd say, 'OK, let's do it, and I can show you how because we've made it work.'"

There's a clear joy in how he and Alli have made it work.

With four children under 10 years old, they live amid the chaos of school and sports and toys and birthday parties. Dinners can be loud, bathtimes can be challenging and scheduling for so many children can be relentlessly complicated. It is, Whitfield says, "a mess of a beautiful family."

"I like to go home and sit down and wrestle with my kids until they upset me and I yell at them," he says.

Whitfield is a gentle-spoken man who beats himself up over his bad Spanish and wonders sometimes if he spends enough time with his children. He's a relentless reader — his shelves hold everything from Jane Austen to Dickens to Ta-Nehisi Coates to treatises on Catholic theology and a biography of St. Benedict.

Theirs is, in many ways, a traditional marriage: he works; she oversees the house and the kids.

The demands on Whitfield are relentless: Masses, confession, church administration, counseling, bureaucratic issues with the church's school, regional clergy meetings.

Both sometimes find themselves wrestling with the dual pulls of the church and family.

"It would be nice if he would be with us on a Saturday morning," said Alli, because that's when Josh often has Mass and confession and she is juggling soccer games and birthday parties.

While the parish has warmly welcomed Whitfield and his family, there are occasional complications, from newcomers shocked when Whitfield mentions Alli in a sermon, to a priest's wife — a convert — who isn't quite sure about some Catholic traditions.

"It leads me to stalking moms who grew up Catholic to ask: What did your family do? ... Do you let your kids eat meat on Friday?" she said.

She sees her family as completely normal, albeit more conservative and religious than most. When Whitfield was wrestling with his Episcopalian faith, her concerns were often more prosaic.

"We were at this nice (Episcopal) church and they were supportive of us. We knew where his paychecks were coming from. And if we became Catholic all that would stop. I think that was the big fear for me: Your husband not having a job all of a sudden."

Sometimes, she's still surprised at where she has found herself after meeting Josh in college, when she was just out of her teens.

"I didn't ask for any of this. I was a 20-year-old girl just praying for a man with some faith. But you know, I guess God thought this would be pretty funny."

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Evidence in trash can links dead neighbor to missing SC girl

By JEFFREY COLLINS Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — Investigators found a man dead inside his South Carolina home shortly after finding an item from a missing 6-year-old girl who lived in his neighborhood inside his trash can, authorities said.

Three days after Faye Marie Swetlik's mother frantically called 911 to report her daughter's disappearance from their front yard in Cayce, the girl's body was found Thursday. Her death is being investigated as a homicide, although details about how she died have not been released.

The girl's body was found in the woods, and police think it was put there after investigators found the evidence inside the trash can, Cayce Public Safety Sgt. Evan Antley said at a Friday news conference.

Antley didn't directly link the death of 30-year-old Coty Scott Taylor, whose body was found at his home, to the girl's killing. But Antley said the item found in Taylor's trash Thursday was something listed on the missing person flyer created after she disappeared. He did not specify exactly what it was.

"Our evidence and our investigation does link these two together, I can confirm he was a neighbor. He was not a relative. He was not a friend. He was merely a neighbor," Antley said.

Both bodies were found Thursday after the item was found by investigators who followed around a trash truck and sifted through the garbage as it made a special trip in the neighborhood, Antley said.

After finding the item, investigators were quickly organizing a methodical search of nearby woods that had been searched before when Cayce Public Safety Director Byron Snellgrove found Faye's body, Antley said. Less than three hours later, Snellgrove's voice trembled as he publicly announced her death.

Investigators found Taylor's body inside his home shortly after they found the girl's body, Antley said. He refused to characterize how Taylor might have died.

Autopsies on both Taylor and the girl are scheduled for Saturday and their causes of death will not be released until the coroner can review the results.

In a 911 call released Friday, Faye's mother said her daughter was in the front yard after getting off the school bus and then just suddenly disappeared. She said she searched for her before calling police.

"I checked all the houses in my neighborhood and anybody that actually answered is out looking for her too," the girl's mother said after carefully describing what her daughter was wearing through tears in the 911 call.

More than 250 officers searched for the girl over three days. They knocked on every door in the neighborhood and Taylor spoke to police in his home before the evidence was discovered, Antley said.

Investigators sealed off the entrance to the neighborhood for a while, questioning everyone going in and out, said Antley, who thanked them for their patience.

"We went in there and turned their lives upside down. We made them late for work, we searched their homes and we invaded their privacy," Antley said. "But we did it for a reason and we had a goal."

The girl's disappearance shocked Cayce, a town of about 13,000 people just west of Columbia. Several prayer vigils were held while she was missing and after her body was found.

Follow Jeffrey Collins on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/JSCollinsAP>

Jimmy Hoffa associate who was suspect in disappearance dies

Associated Press undefined

BOCA RATON, Fla. (AP) — Charles "Chuckie" O'Brien, a longtime associate of Teamsters boss Jimmy Hoffa who became a leading suspect in the labor leader's disappearance and later was portrayed in the Martin Scorsese film "The Irishman," has died.

O'Brien's stepson, Harvard Law School professor Jack Goldsmith, said in a blog post that O'Brien died

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Thursday in Boca Raton, Florida, from what appeared to be a heart attack. He was 86.

O'Brien was a constant companion to Hoffa in the decades when the labor leader developed the Teamsters into one of the largest and most powerful unions in the nation in the from the late 1950s to the early 1970s. After Hoffa's still-unsolved disappearance in 1975, O'Brien became a leading suspect when the federal government publicly accused him of picking up Hoffa and driving him to his death.

Goldsmith called the accusation untrue. "But practically everyone believed it," he said.

FBI agents questioned O'Brien about the death at least a dozen times.

In an interview with The Associated Press in 2006, O'Brien denied having anything to do with Hoffa's disappearance and said he didn't think the mystery of his death would ever be solved.

O'Brien said he viewed Hoffa as a father figure. He was a child when Hoffa took him in, along with his mother.

"It's very frustrating. I have so much inside, my love for him and his family," O'Brien said.

Hoffa was Teamsters president from 1957 to 1971. The FBI has said his disappearance was probably connected to his attempts to regain power in the union. It was known that Hoffa intended to testify before the special U.S. Senate investigative panel, known as the Church Committee, about Mafia involvement in U.S.-backed plots to assassinate Cuban President Fidel Castro, O'Brien told the AP.

O'Brien was born in Kansas City, Missouri, in 1933. As a young child, he moved to Detroit with his mother after his father abandoned the family, and O'Brien's mother became friends with the Hoffa family. When Hoffa became president of the union, O'Brien became his special assistant at age 23, according to Goldsmith.

"They were so close, and Hoffa treated Chuckie with such affection, that many people thought Hoffa was his biological father," Goldsmith said.

In the 2019 Scorsese film, O'Brien was portrayed by actor Jesse Plemons.

O'Brien is survived by his wife, Brenda, a daughter and four sons and stepsons.

Valentine's Day brings love and some worry in Iraq holy city

By MARIAM FAM Associated Press

NAJAF, Iraq (AP) — Hasanain al-Rufaye was busy in his flower shop wrapping bouquets, stuffing dolls into gift boxes and sprinkling petals into others labeled with "LOVE," while simultaneously fielding orders.

"It's Valentine's these days. On normal days, it would have been 10 minutes but today that would be impossible," he told one customer on the phone about the wait time to get an order ready.

For all the frenzied activity and lightheartedness in the shop there was more than just love in the air for al-Rufaye: "There's still some worry and fear."

Valentine's Days past could be fraught with tensions. One year, an angry crowd burst into his store yelling "Shut it down, shut it down" while others shouted "infidels!" Heart-shaped balloons framing the entrance of the store were popped by the mob. Al-Rufaye was beaten and his clothes torn. Windows were shattered and the teddy bears he sells set ablaze, he said. "It was the most difficult day of my life."

In recent years, Valentine's Day in the southern city of Najaf has emerged as a battleground. On one side are personal freedom advocates and revelers who see it as harmless fun. Pitted against them are conservatives who view it as sacrilege--a foreign celebration that has no place in a city sacred to Shiite Muslims, site of the shrine of the much revered Imam Ali, son-in-law and cousin of the Prophet Muhammad.

In the last few years, a religious mourning event was held near stores selling Valentine's gifts in part to counter the love festivities. This year, that event was scrapped for security reasons after at least eight anti-government protesters were killed this month in a nearby protest camp.

"Thank God, I observe my religion. I pray and I fast, but I am not a hardliner when it comes to religion," al-Rufaye said. "I love life. I love for people to be optimistic and happy."

"Najaf is a holy city and I am against people singing or dancing on the street...but if someone is buying a gift for his fiancée, wife, mother or sister, then what's the problem?" he asked. "It's just a teddy bear or a flower."

Religion is ingrained into Najaf's DNA. The holy city is an esteemed seat for Shiite learning. Low-slung

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houses tucked away in dusty alleys are home to clerical luminaries including Iraq's top Shiite cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. Pilgrims — the women covered up in billowing black abayas—flock to the city. Mourning processions commemorating the death of Shiite saints weave through its streets as believers pound their chests in grief. And its vast cemetery is a coveted final resting place for Shiites.

The issue of Najaf's "sanctity" has spurred heated debates. Some have been clamoring for a law outlawing women not wearing the veil in public or stores displaying women's clothes in windows or on the street "in a way that runs contrary to public morality."

The now-dissolved provincial council hosted talks between supporters and opponents, including clerics, lawyers and activists, said Hussein al-Essawi, the head of its legal committee. It ended up not supporting the veil and clothing proposals but it did adopt a provincial decree last year keeping some articles, such as one against holding parties with dancing or singing "that violate public decency" on the street.

"Some people exploit the sanctity of the city and the status of Najaf to try to restrict freedoms," al-Essawi said. "Religion means tolerance; it means culture, freedom and democracy." Many clerics were against stifling freedoms, he said.

"Najaf is a holy city whether there is a law or there isn't a law," he said.

But Hasan Hamza, a member of the dissolved council, argued a decree was necessary because of offensive behavior, including women dressing immodestly or some cafes employing women to attract a male clientele. "We took into consideration human rights, modernity and democracy," he said.

Celebrations such as Valentine's Day should be held in private places like hotels, not on the street, he said. "This ruffles the feathers of others in society."

Najaf is not the only city addressing Valentine's Day. The annual homage to romance also appeared to cause some worry elsewhere. In the Afghan capital, Kabul, there's a contest called Mr. and Miss Valentine but the organizers, apparently afraid of a backlash from religious conservatives, said that despite the name it had nothing to do with Valentine's Day.

Some religious clerics on mosque loudspeakers warn against western influences, worst among them Valentine's Day. "Valentine's is an un-Islamic day and celebrating this day can bring girls and boys under the same roof which is not allowed in Islam until after they are married," said cleric Abdul Aziz Mufleh. Still, the capital's downtown is resplendent with red heart-shaped balloons and flowers.

Emad Rasoul, one of the organizers of the mourning events around Valentine's time in Najaf, said that besides religious and other reasons-- such as commemorating fighters killed in the battle against Islamic State militants--they wanted to send a message to the young. "This is not our celebration to observe. This celebration runs contrary to our religious and social constants," he said.

"The purpose is not to turn Najaf into a closed-off or uncivilized city...but there are opportunists who want to tarnish the image of Najaf and of its sect," he argued. "They want to undermine the city with such ideas as Valentine's. There is no such a thing as Valentine's in Najaf."

He said he agreed with police on canceling the event this year due to the security situation and to free police for protecting protesters.

"People in Najaf don't want to be isolated from the world," activist Yaser Mekki said. "The Iraqi society suffers from wars, pain, tragedies and bloodshed. All these horrible things have led the young and others in society to look for an outlet away from all the destruction."

Last year, Mekki got thrust into the Valentine's controversy when he was stopped by police and dragged to a police station after filming the mourning event and asking people on the street for their views.

There are attempts by "a political religious elite to create an imaginary enemy to have the people coalesce around them as the protectors of the religion and of the sect," he said.

"There is a special status for Najaf that must continue. At the same time there are people who love life and want to make changes," he said. "The thing is how to find balance."

At al-Rufaye's store, 20-year-old Israa Amer, swathed in a flowing abaya, browsed shelves lined with red lanterns with hearts carved into them, teddy bears with the words "Me to You" and red hearts on sticks. She deliberated with a friend before she settled on a choice.

Those who want to celebrate should do so indoors out of respect for the people recently killed, she said.

One Najaf cafe with a special section for "families" separate from that for men was decorated with balloons and red tablecloths for the holiday.

Some have been observing Valentine's with a Najafi twist. Ali al-Sunbuly and other local activists one time, in a show of gratitude, handed flowers to police at a checkpoint that had been attacked. Another Valentine's Day, they showed up with flowers at the office of al-Sistani. The flowers weren't allowed in for security reasons, he said.

An answer to a question about the religious ruling on celebrating Valentine's on al-Sistani's website says there is no objection "as long as there is no propagating of corruption or of straying from the right path."

The protests, al-Sunbuly said, were amplifying the voice of the young and pushing the social envelop.

"The youth of this revolution believe in freedoms within the allowed legal framework. They celebrate on New Year's and celebrate on Valentine's," he said. "They are the ones who have always been dismissed as too young or immature and lacking in experience. This revolution has shattered such taboos."

Still, Zainab Radhi said many "are afraid to be seen with a red rose or a red teddy bear." This year, the 20-year-old particularly wanted to celebrate.

"Love is beautiful," she said her face lighting up as she smiled coyly.

"The men, they say this is haram (religiously forbidden) but they do everything they want and just say it's haram for the women of Najaf....It's because of traditions," she said. "I don't accept this. I want everything to change."

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

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Florida 'red flag' gun law used 3,500 times since Parkland

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 authorities say a mentally disturbed man killed 17 people in a shooting 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 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

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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.

Orphaned albino elephant recovers from poacher's snare

By JEROME DELAY Associated Press

HOEDSPRUIT, South Africa (AP) — Khanyisa did not see the trap set by a poacher in South Africa's Kruger National Park. She dove head first into the sharp wire snare, which cut her mouth, face and underneath her ear and chin.

It was days before the four-month-old albino elephant was found badly dehydrated but alive, and taken to the Hoedspruit Elephant Rehabilitation and Development center, three hours away.

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One month later, Khanysia, named after the Tsonga word for light, weighs a healthy 150 kilograms (330 pounds), is adding 500 grams (1 pound) every day and spends her time playing with caretakers.

"She is a little albino elephant, so it is a bit different than your normal elephant just in caring, especially when the sun is kind of severe," said Adine Roode, founder of the center, in the heart of Kapama game reserve. "Due to the animal human conflict, we are sitting with orphans. Because of the decreasing land and habitat, we will see an increase, in the future, of elephant orphans."

It is not known how Khanysia was separated from her mother and herd, said Roode.

For the past 22 years, the center has looked after orphaned elephants, and now has 17 pachyderms on site, she said. The young elephants are eventually released to the private game reserve, she said.

Khanysia is separated from the rest of the herd for the time being. At night she stays in a heated room and in the daytime she goes outside to a large enclosure with tall grass and a mud pool. Under 24-hour supervision, the blue-eyed, pink-skinned toddler seems to be in a non-stop play mood, craving attention and only stopping now and then to scratch her itchy scars on the wood pillars surrounding her pen.

After two hours of cavorting with Khanysia, causing the little elephant to trumpet repeatedly, Roode leaves her in the care of Liverson Sande, the center's senior carer.

Outside, the 17 other elephants line up for a walk. "It's so easy to get too attached," says Roode. "It is difficult to let go."

With virus, shops in China suffer a star-crossed Valentines

By YANAN WANG Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — In virus-stricken China, couples can celebrate Valentine's Day with a roast beef salad, hot chocolate, a rose and a note, all delivered to their door.

The note, scrawled on the front of their sealed order, states the body temperature of the chef who made it.

Moka Bros, a health food eatery in Beijing, offered this special on Friday, Valentine's Day, after a new coronavirus struck central China in December. Like many businesses, the restaurant has struggled to cope with the impact of a disease that has infected more than 64,000 people worldwide and sent several Chinese cities into lockdown. Fearful of infection, people are overwhelmingly choosing to stay at home and cook for themselves.

"It's devastating," said Alex Molina, founder and creative director of Mosto Group, which owns Moka Bros and three other restaurant and bar concepts in China.

Of the nine Moka Bros locations, only three have remained open through the outbreak. Molina is fairly certain some of the stores will be forced to close permanently, which would mean at least \$1.5 million in losses.

"It's just a matter of time. How long can we stay alive?" said Molina, a Colombian who started his first business in China in 2006. "We've been working on this project for 13 years, and then you see it crumble in front of your face, and there's nothing you can do."

The disease, named COVID-19, is believed to have originated in the city of Wuhan, Hubei's capital. It has since spread to more than 20 countries, though the bulk of the cases remain in Hubei. The government has imposed sweeping measures to contain the epidemic, cutting off outbound transportation from the hardest-hit cities and prolonging the Lunar New Year holiday.

The impact on the food, beverage and entertainment industries has been crippling. Authorities in Hubei have mandated the closure of venues like karaoke clubs and movie theaters. Beijing's Administration for Market Regulation has banned restaurants and catering services from hosting group dinners.

Such circumstances made for an atypical Valentine's Day. While the Qixi Festival in August is China's traditional holiday for lovers, Feb. 14 has been eagerly adopted by young people who mark the occasion at shopping malls, restaurants and movie theaters.

Not this year.

Earlier this month, two Chinese romance films canceled their Valentine's Day releases due to the virus.

"As a movie about young love, 'The Enigma of Arrival' hopes that every person who has love in their

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heart can be healthy and safe," one film said in a statement posted on Weibo, a Twitter-like social media platform.

Major flower markets in Beijing were closed Friday. In a period that often sees peak sales, Chinese business publications reported that flower sellers were having to throw out unwanted floral arrangements that had been left to wilt. On social media, Chinese people shared images of bouquets filled with surgical masks, joking that they were the true symbols of love in the time of the coronavirus.

The country's normally booming food delivery services have also taken a hit. Zhao Pengcheng, one of Beijing's legion of delivery people, collectively known as "Takeout Brothers," said orders have been sparse through the outbreak.

Sitting astride his electric scooter with a surgical mask strapped to his face, Zhao said restaurant orders have dwindled, while more and more people are ordering from grocery stores. Most apartment complexes now don't allow him to take the orders upstairs, as he usually would; some check his temperature.

"We try to avoid any sort of physical contact," Zhao said. "It's pretty strict." Businesses will often leave the prepared orders in one spot for him to pick up, and he does the same when he brings them to customers.

Moka Bros has instituted near-hourly temperature checks for its employees, who all wear gloves and masks. Tables are frequently disinfected, hand sanitizers have been placed around the restaurant, and dishes are washed at higher than usual temperatures.

At the eatery Friday evening, dimmed lights and free sparkling wine aimed to set the mood for couples. Candles were supposed to adorn the tables, but their delivery was canceled last minute, a common occurrence these days.

"Those of us who work in the restaurant business are really feeling the financial pressure," said Chen Tiantian, a manager at Moka Bros. "It's painful. We hope the epidemic will quickly pass."

Associated Press video producer Olivia Zhang in Beijing contributed to this report.

Today in History By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Saturday, Feb. 15, the 46th day of 2020. There are 320 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Feb. 15, 1898, the U.S. battleship Maine mysteriously blew up in Havana Harbor, killing more than 260 crew members and bringing the United States closer to war with Spain.

On this date:

In 1564, Italian astronomer Galileo Galilei was born in Pisa.

In 1879, President Rutherford B. Hayes signed a bill allowing female attorneys to argue cases before the Supreme Court.

In 1933, President-elect Franklin D. Roosevelt escaped an assassination attempt in Miami that mortally wounded Chicago Mayor Anton J. Cermak; gunman Giuseppe Zangara was executed more than four weeks later.

In 1952, a funeral was held at Windsor Castle for Britain's King George VI, who had died nine days earlier.

In 1961, 73 people, including an 18-member U.S. figure skating team en route to the World Championships in Czechoslovakia, were killed in the crash of a Sabena Airlines Boeing 707 in Belgium.

In 1989, the Soviet Union announced that the last of its troops had left Afghanistan, after more than nine years of military intervention.

In 1992, a Milwaukee jury found that Jeffrey Dahmer was sane when he killed and mutilated 15 men and boys. (The decision meant that Dahmer, who had already pleaded guilty to the murders, would receive a mandatory life sentence for each count; Dahmer was beaten to death in prison in 1994.)

In 2004, Dale Earnhardt Jr. won the Daytona 500 on the same track where his father was killed three years earlier.

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In 2005, defrocked priest Paul Shanley was sentenced in Boston to 12 to 15 years in prison on child rape charges.

In 2006, Vice President Dick Cheney accepted blame for accidentally shooting a hunting companion, calling it "one of the worst days of my life," but was defiantly unapologetic in a Fox News Channel interview about not publicly disclosing the incident until the next day.

In 2007, National Guardsmen in Humvees ferried food, fuel and baby supplies to hundreds of motorists stranded for nearly a day on a 50-mile stretch of Interstate 78 in eastern Pennsylvania because of a monster storm.

In 2018, the last of the bodies of the 17 victims of a school shooting in Florida were removed from the building after authorities analyzed the crime scene; 13 wounded survivors were still hospitalized. In response to the Florida school shooting, President Donald Trump, in an address to the nation, promised to "tackle the difficult issue of mental health," but avoided any mention of guns. Nikolas Cruz, the suspect in the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, was ordered held without bond at a brief court hearing.

Ten years ago: Eighteen people were killed when two trains collided south of Brussels, Belgium. At the Vancouver Winter Olympics, Didier Defago of Switzerland won the gold in the Olympic downhill and American Bode (BOH'-dee) Miller took the bronze. American Seth Wescott defended his Olympic title, overtaking Canada's Mike Robertson to win the gold medal in men's snowboardcross.

Five years ago: A video purporting to show the mass beheading of Egyptian Coptic Christian hostages was released by militants in Libya affiliated with the Islamic State group. Russell Westbrook scored 41 points to lead the Western Conference to a 163-158 win over the East in the NBA All-Star Game. Foreign correspondent and news executive Arnaud de Borchgrave, 88, died in Washington.

One year ago: In a move to secure more money for his border wall, President Donald Trump declared a national emergency at the U.S.-Mexico border, exercising a broad interpretation of his presidential powers. (Congress voted to block the emergency declaration, but Trump vetoed that measure.) Socialite Lee Radziwill, a stylish jet-setter who was the sister of Jacqueline Kennedy, died at the age of 85. Gary Martin, a 15-year employee who was being fired from a suburban Chicago manufacturing company, opened fire on co-workers, killing five of them and wounding five police officers before he was killed in an exchange of gunfire with police.

Today's Birthdays: Actress Claire Bloom is 89. Author Susan Brownmiller is 85. Songwriter Brian Holland is 79. Rock musician Mick Avory (The Kinks) is 76. Jazz musician Henry Threadgill is 76. Actress-model Marisa Berenson is 73. Actress Jane Seymour is 69. Singer Melissa Manchester is 69. Actress Lynn Whitfield is 67. "Simpsons" creator Matt Groening (GREE'-ning) is 66. Model Janice Dickinson is 65. Actor Christopher McDonald is 65. Reggae singer Ali Campbell is 61. Actor Joseph R. Gannascoli is 61. Musician Mikey Craig (Culture Club) is 60. College and Pro Football Hall of Famer Darrell Green is 60. Actor-comedian Steven Michael Quezada is 57. Country singer Michael Reynolds (Pinmonkey) is 56. Actor Michael Easton is 53. Latin singer Gloria Trevi is 52. Rock musician Stevie Benton (Drowning Pool) is 49. Actress Alex Borstein is 49. Actress Renee O'Connor is 49. Actress Sarah Wynter is 47. Olympic gold medal swimmer Amy Van Dyken-Rouen is 47. Actress-director Miranda July is 46. Rock singer Brandon Boyd (Incubus) is 44. Rock musician Ronnie Vannucci (The Killers) is 44. Rock singer/guitarist Adam Granduciel (The War on Drugs) is 41. Singer-songwriter-musician Conor Oberst (Bright Eyes) is 40. Actress Ashley Lyn Cafagna is 37. Blues-rock musician Gary Clark Jr. is 36. Actress Natalie Morales is 35. Actress Amber Riley is 34. Rapper Megan Thee Stallion is 25. Actor Zach Gordon is 22.

Thought for Today: "Like all dreamers I confuse disenchantment with truth." — Jean-Paul Sartre, French philosopher (1905-1980).

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