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Death Notice: Joyce Bawek

Joyce Bawek, 90, of Conde passed away peacefully at her home on November 25, 2020. Services are pending with Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel, Groton.



OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.

#277 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

Numbers are light today; it looks like a Sunday, only lower. This is not because things are better; it is because at least 14 (probably more) states took the day off from data reporting; additionally, many county and regional health departments in other states shut down reporting for the day too. Some states are taking tomorrow off too; others will show artificial spikes when they resume reporting tomorrow, so there's no telling how all of this is going to play out over the next few days. Since access to testing is also likely to be low through the weekend, it could be well into next week before things normalize again. I'll continue to report what I'm seeing each day; but I'm going to guess the numbers will be less than meaningful for several days. Along about Tuesday, we'll see what we have.

There were just 109,800 new cases reported today, lowest in over two weeks. It's sort of hard to wrap my brain around the view that over 100,000 new cases is low, but there you are. The good news is that we did not hit 13 million today; we're up 0.9% today at 12,950,200 and sure to be at 13 million tomorrow. Our seven-day new-case average continues at a record level over 176,000. Cases are rising in 40 states. We're seeing record seven-day new-case averages in Arizona, Ohio, Maine, and Delaware. Arkansas and Pennsylvania had record numbers of new cases today. Hospitalizations set a record for the 16th consecutive day at 89,959.

There were 1274 deaths reported today, a 0.5% increase in total deaths. We have now lost 263,294 Americans to Covid-19, and these numbers are surging in all of the places where new cases have been surging for weeks now.

Some not-so-great news is that it appears the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine trials are something of a mess. More information has surfaced since the announcement of preliminary results a few days ago. You may recall the press release said one dosing regimen (half-dose followed by full dose) showed 90% efficacy and the other regimen (two full doses) had 62% efficacy for an average of 70.4%. At the time, a reader asked me whether it was logical that the half-then-full dose regimen would be superior or maybe this was just a sample size effect, and I replied that I simply don't know enough about it to have an opinion. Well, I know more today, and what I'm learning does not inspire confidence.

It appears the half-doses were not given as part of the trial design, but were actually the result of an error. They had not meant to give anyone the half-dose, but an issue with how some doses were manufactured resulted in the half-doses. When the problem was discovered (and the manufacturing process fixed), the company decided to go ahead with the subgroup who received the smaller doses, calling the error serendipitous when the results looked so good; but it's not as straightforward as all that. Not even close.

First of all, many experts will tell you that this sort of change on the fly undercuts the credibility of results when trials were not designed to test the particular condition in the first place. There are some pretty rigid protocols for clinical trials precisely to assure a solid foundation for the conclusions drawn in the end; going outside those protocols is rarely viewed as a good thing; scientists aren't that hot on things that happen by accident unless the effect is tested seven ways from Sunday after it appears, which this one has not been. Doesn't help that it appears several weeks went by before the error was discovered; I'm not sure how the hell that even happens if everyone's awake on the job. (For the record, none of these half-dose recipients were in the US trial; these all appears to have occurred in other countries. The company said it will work with the FDA to add that to the protocol in the US as soon as possible, presumably so that all of their trials are operating with similar protocols.)

Additionally, the number of participants receiving the half-strength dose was small relative to the overall trial, fewer than 2800 compared with almost 8900 receiving two full doses, and differently-sized samples are always subject to difficulty in interpretation. There is also the matter that the 131 cases reported were not broken down by which group received them, the full-first-dose group, the half-first-dose group, or the placebo group.

Then, the company reported results that had been pooled from two differently designed trials in the UK and Brazil. This is not standard practice in reporting clinical trial results, and that gave a number of experts

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heartburn when evaluating what they were seeing. When trials have different designs, the results really should be reported separately so that the effects of those different designs are immediately apparent to those assessing the data and don't confound the analysis.

But the biggest issue is with this subset of participants who received the initial half-dose: None of them were over 55 years of age. I doubt I even need to explain the problem here. We have had enough discussions of the reduced response to antigenic stimulus typically seen in older individuals to understand this is a huge problem. I'm going to guess one great way to drive up efficacy numbers on your vaccine (for any disease) would be to test it only in younger people. I'm not a vaccinologist, but I'll hazard a guess this alone might be enough to account for the radically better results in that subset of participants.

This whole thing stinks to high heaven, especially given most of this was not disclosed in the announcement last week and has only trickled out after the fact, especially given US regulators who received an information packet are the ones who rang the alarm bell instead of the company disclosing it when making their announcement. There are serious, serious issues here.

Reaction has been rapid and fierce, most of it mentioning erosion of confidence in the vaccine candidate—and, honestly, probably the company too. US regulators said the results were not clear.

Geoffrey Proges, analyst for the investment bank SVB Leerink, said, "I think that they have really damaged confidence in their whole development program."

John Moore, professor of microbiology and immunology at Weill Cornell Medical College, said, "The press release raised more questions than it answered." I think that's a good guess. We'll see how this plays out, but I do not see a quick emergency use authorization in this vaccine candidate's future; I suspect regulators are now going to move very cautiously through AstraZeneca land.

I will point out too, however, that this particular dark cloud has a shiny silver lining: Turns out when there is data transparency, it's easy enough to have confidence in any approved vaccine in the end. If you show your data to the world, people who know things are completely capable of letting the rest of us know when we need to be wary. This is precisely how science works at its best, and it's working for all of us in the vaccine development process. You need have no fear whatsoever about whether any approved vaccine is safe and effective; the process just showed us that it works just as it is meant to. When you consider whether to receive a vaccine in the coming weeks and months, put your ear to the ground and listen for what scientists in the field say; if they say this is a safe and effective vaccine, you can be sure it is. And that is great news.

Instead of my usual story tonight, I'm going to leave you with a message. Pope Francis, in an op-ed in the New York Times, gave us a message about the pandemic that strikes me as apropos for the times we find ourselves living through, and I don't think you need to be a Christian or a believer or even think of him as anything more than some guy with an opinion to find value in it. He talks in the piece about a subject I've been discussing with all of you for some time: how we can make it happen that we come out of this terrible time a better society.

It turns out the Pope has some relevant experience with a devastating respiratory disease; he nearly died at age 21 from a lung infection and had one lobe of a lung removed as a result. He spent a long time in the hospital and was, more than once, not expected to live. He says, "I have some sense of how people with Covid-19 feel as they struggle to breathe on a ventilator." But his message isn't really about Covid-19 at all. It is about us.

He spoke of nurses who broke the rules to get him the treatment he needed and the call to service of those caring for others in hazardous conditions—the health care workers risking their lives to do this work. He calls these "saints next door who have awakened something important in our hearts . . . the antibodies to the virus of indifference. They remind us that our lives are a gift and we grow by giving of ourselves, not preserving ourselves but losing ourselves in service." There is a need to answer that call to service even if we can do it only in small doses here and there as the need presents itself. We've talked about that many times over these months, and I believe to my toes that we must be those antibodies too.

Pope Francis tells us, "These are moments in life that can be ripe for change . . . Each of us has had

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our own 'stoppage,' or if we haven't yet, we will someday: illness, the failure of a marriage or a business, some great disappointment or betrayal. As in the Covid-19 lockdown, those moments generate a tension, a crisis that reveals what is in our hearts," and goes on to say, "In every personal 'Covid,' so to speak, in every 'stoppage,'" what is revealed is what needs to change: our lack of internal freedom, the idols we have been serving, the ideologies we have tried to live by, the relationships we have neglected."

He talks about how we respond to the discomfort and inconvenience and pain of restricting our movements and our social contacts and our freedoms, saying, "Looking to the common good is much more than the sum of what is good for individuals. It means having a regard for all citizens and seeking to respond effectively to the needs of the least fortunate."

And then he brings it home: "The coronavirus crisis may seem special because it affects most of humankind. But it is special only in how visible it is. There are a thousand other crises that are just as dire, but are just far enough from some of us that we can act as if they don't exist." He speaks of how easy it is to ignore these crises because they seem distant to us, and adds, "But like the Covid-19 crisis, they affect the whole of humanity."

"Look at us now: We put on face masks to protect ourselves and others from a virus we can't see. But what about all those other unseen viruses we need to protect ourselves from? How will we deal with the hidden pandemics of this world?"

"If we are to come out of this crisis less selfish than when we went in, we have to let ourselves be touched by others' pain."

"This is a moment to dream big, to rethink our priorities—what we value, what we want, what we seek—and to commit to act in our daily life on what we have dreamed of."

While this is not a story, it sort of is the point of most of the stories I've been telling you for months. The only way to get the sort of world we want is to build it ourselves, one small act at a time. When you pass through a place, whether your passage be short or long, you must leave that place better for your passage. It's popular to make jokes about discovering "the meaning of life" (and I do that too), but for me this is it: leaving each place better than you found it. This is a powerful tool for change.

Be well, be thankful, and be safe. We'll talk again.



GHS Volleyball Awards

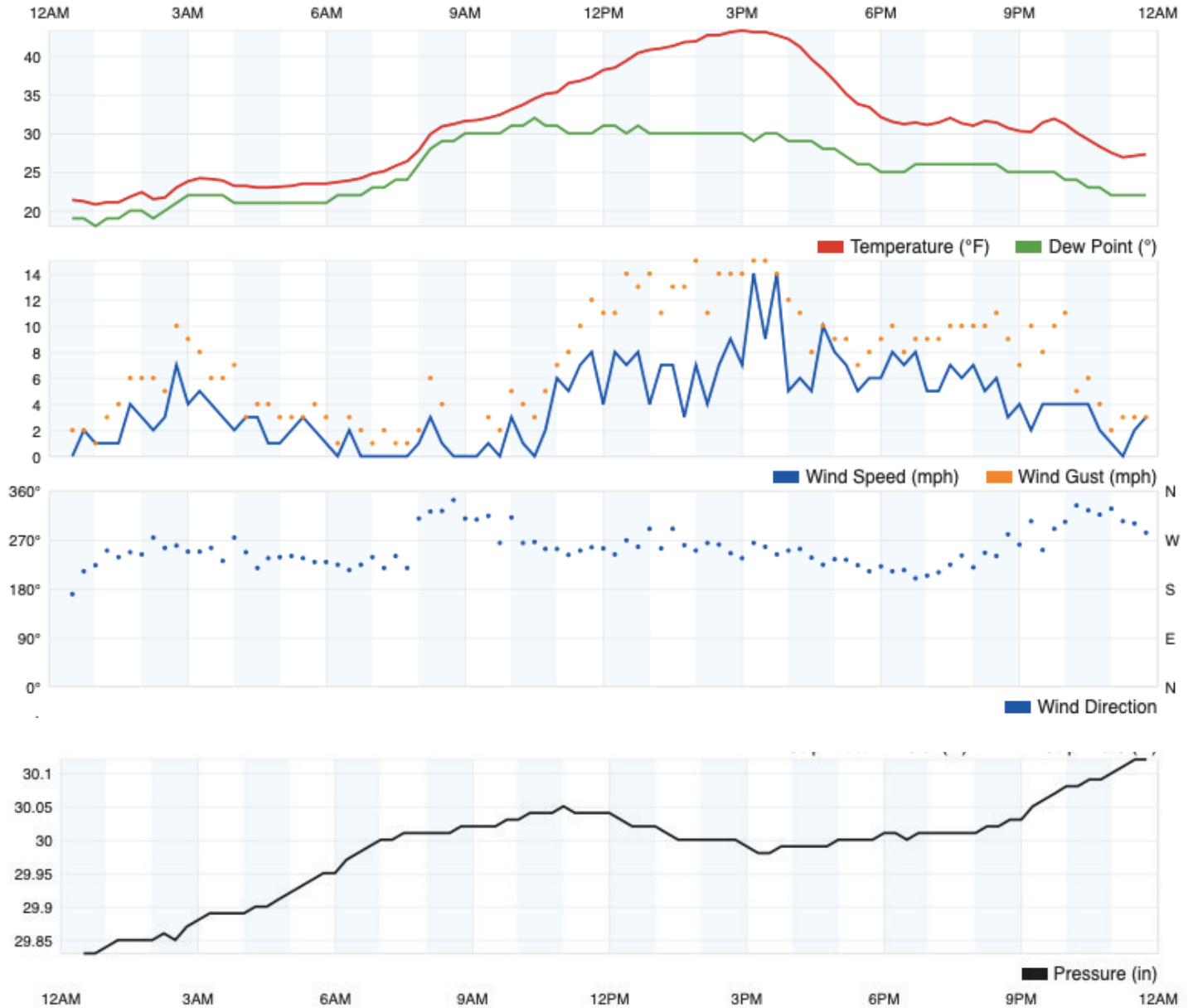
Back Row L to R: MVP Offense: Madeline Flihs, Most Improved: Kenzie McInerney, Spirit of the Tiger: Brooklyn Gilbert and Grace Wambach, ACE Award: Jasmine Gengerke
Front Row L to R: MVP Defense: Alyssa Thaler, Hustler: Allyssa Locke, Rookie of the Year: Sydney Leicht

All Northeast Conference Team: Madeline Flihs (Courtesy photo)

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Yesterday's Groton Weather



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Today

Tonight

Saturday

Saturday
Night

Sunday



Sunny



Mostly Clear



Sunny



Mostly Cloudy



Sunny and
Breezy

High: 45 °F

Low: 26 °F

High: 53 °F

Low: 24 °F

High: 34 °F

NWS ABERDEEN



November 27, 2020

Mild and Dry Weekend

Friday
High Temps: 40-55°
Winds: SW 10-15 mph with slightly higher gusts

Saturday
Warmer & Breezy
High Temps: 50-60°
Winds: WSW 10-20 mph with higher gusts

Sunday
Cooler & Windy
High Temps: 30-40°
Winds: NW 15-25 mph with higher gusts

Temperatures **10°-15°** above average **Friday** and **20°-25°** above average **Saturday!**

A black thermometer icon with a white scale and a red liquid level.

Unseasonably warm temperatures are on tap for Friday and Saturday, along with west to southwesterly breezes. Expect a cool down to near normal temperatures on Sunday. Dry conditions persist.

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Today in Weather History

November 27, 1960: An ice storm occurred from 40 miles on either side of a line from Pipestone to Brainerd, Minnesota. Power and communication lines were downed, leaving at least 22 communities isolated. Ice coating reported ranged from one half to three fourth of an inch at Lake Benton. Heavy snow fell in eastern North Dakota with blizzard conditions throughout the state. In South Dakota, this storm began as freezing rain on the 27th and remained largely as such in the southeast quarter of the state. The remainder of the experienced blizzard conditions with 5 to 10 inches of snow and winds gusting to 30 to 60 mph. These horrible caused extensive closing of schools and businesses, blocked highways, and disrupted telephone and power services. Slippery highways caused many auto accidents. Some loss of livestock was reported, such as 1,000 turkeys in Gettysburg. Restoration of telephone service alone was estimated to have cost \$210,000 and required up to three days after the storm.

November 27, 1983: A weekend storm that began with light snow on the 26th continued to gather strength, culminating in a blizzard that was accompanied by thunder and lightning during the evening hours on the 27th. The heaviest snowfall occurred from Marshall County SSE to Gregory County in South Dakota, with the heaviest snow falling as thunder snow showers. Snow amounts ranged from 4 to 18 inches. Strong winds up to 50 mph created near zero visibilities and difficult driving conditions as numerous roads drifted shut with up to eight-foot drifts. Numerous accidents ensued, with many people forced to stay overnight in their stranded vehicles. Airlines were forced to cancel all flights as airports were closed into midday on the 28th. Almost all schools and businesses were closed on the 28th and even on the 29th in many areas. Storm total snowfall amounts included 8 inches at Clark; 7 inches at Artichoke Lake, Bryant 1NE, Clear Lake, Victor 4 NNE, and Browns Valley; 6 inches at Wheaton, Wilmot, and Harrold 12 SSW; 5 inches at Kennebec, Sisseton, and Mellette 4W; 4 inches at Watertown, Highmore 1W, Murdo, Redfield, Waubay, Ashton 2S, and Britton; and 3 inches at Aberdeen, Castlewood, Columbia 8N, Onida 4NW, and Pierre.

November 27, 1994: Low pressure developed over eastern Colorado late Saturday the 26th and strengthened over Kansas early on the 27th. By late in the day on the 27th, the low pressure system had developed into the first winter storm for Minnesota. By the early morning hours of the 28th, a swath of snow in excess of 6 inches had blanketed much of southwest through central into northeast Minnesota.

Snowfalls of 6 inches or more occurred south of a line from Gunflint Lake in Cook County to near Ortonville in Big Stone County and along and north of a line from near Blue Earth in Faribault county to Red Wing in Goodhue county. The snow closed the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport for a short time on the 27th, and contributed to hundreds of accidents and at least three fatalities. The greatest snowfall was 14.1 inches in Duluth. In addition, very strong east winds gusted over 50 mph in Duluth causing blizzard conditions. The high winds brought waves in excess of 16 feet crashing against the Lake Superior shoreline in Duluth, covering the Duluth Canal Park Lake Walk with extensive debris. A buildup of ice and snow in combination with strong winds resulted in numerous downed power lines in southeast Minnesota. Widespread heavy snow fell over mostly the eastern half of South Dakota on November 27-28. Peak accumulations were 10 inches at Sioux Falls and 9 inches at Howard and near Canton. Damage resulted mainly from numerous minor traffic accidents. Storm snowfall amounts in this area included 8 inches at Eureka; 7 inches at Victor 4NNE, Leola, Onaka 2N, Roscoe, Faulkton, Columbia 8N, Aberdeen, and Selby; 6 inches at Redfield, Mellette 4W, Bryant 1NE, Blunt, Wheaton, and Raymond 3NE; 5 inches at Pollock, Miller, Milbank 2SSW, Ipswich, Harrold 12SSW, Eagle Butte, Clark, Artichoke Lake, and Onida 4NW; 4 inches at Mobridge, Timber Lake, McIntosh 6SE, Conde, Clear Lake, Pierre, and Ashton 2S; 3 inches at Sisseton, Webster, Waubay, Summit 1W, Presho 7NW, Kennebec, Highmore 1W, Gann Valley 4NW, Castlewood, Browns Valley, Watertown, and Wilmot.

November 27, 1701: Anders Celsius, the astronomer who invented the Celsius, often called the centigrade thermometer scale was born on this date.

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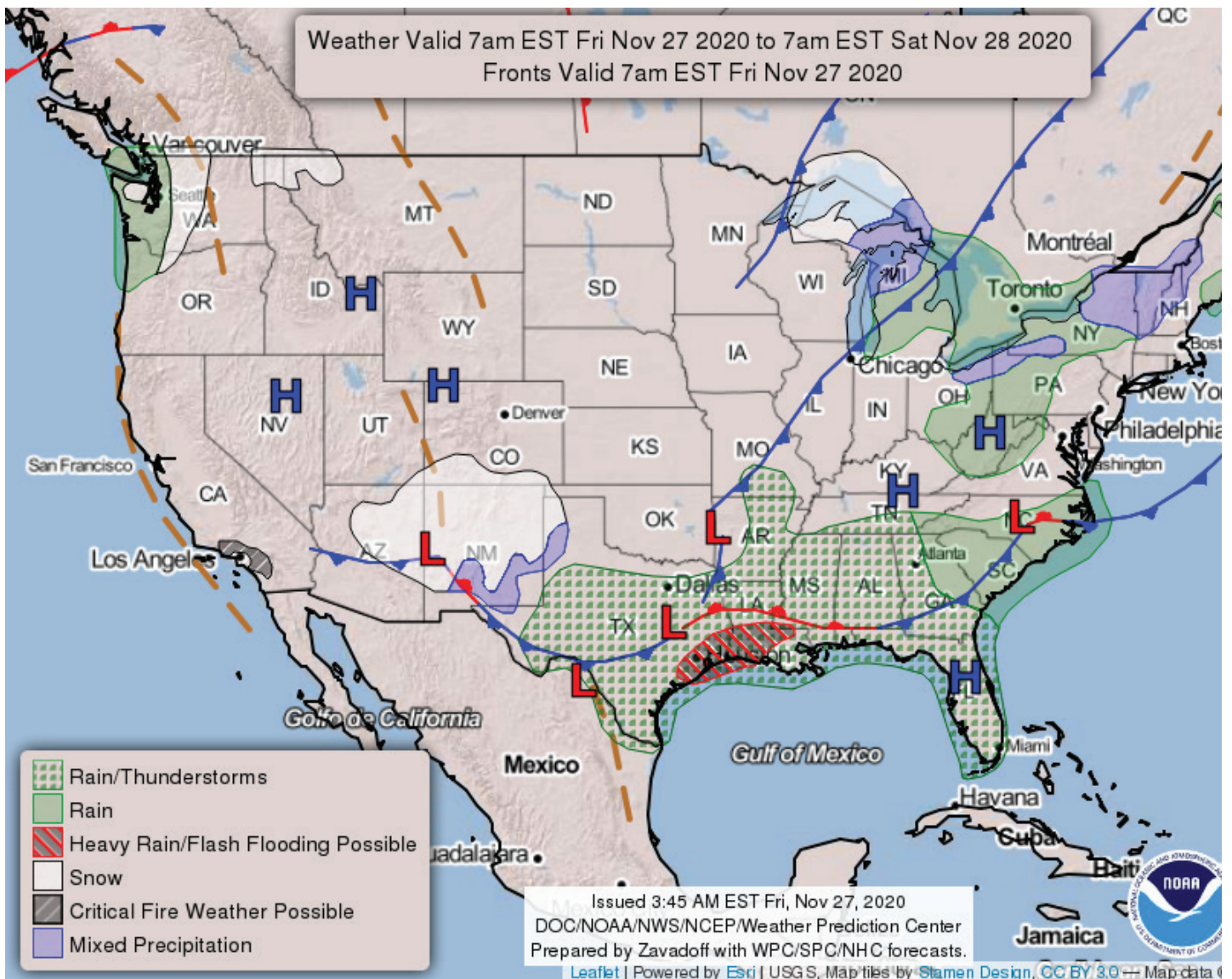
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 43 °F at 2:18 PM
Low Temp: 21 °F at 1:00 AM
Wind: 15 mph at 1:59 PM
Precip: .00

Today's Info

Record High: 70° in 1914
Record Low: -18° in 1985
Average High: 33°F
Average Low: 13°F
Average Precip in Nov.: 0.66
Precip to date in Nov.: 0.18
Average Precip to date: 21.13
Precip Year to Date: 16.52
Sunset Tonight: 4:54 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:50 a.m.



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GOD'S GRACE

Now and then it is good to take a "morning inventory" and reflect on the grace of God.

This morning when I opened my eyes I thanked God for protecting me while I slept. As I turned off the alarm clock, I thanked Him for sounds and my hearing. As I rested for a moment before getting out of bed, I could feel my beating heart which He kept working while I slept. As I stood up, I thanked Him for my balance, healthy legs, and my slippers. As I took a shower, I thanked Him for the warm water, shampoo, soap, a towel, and a mat on the floor to keep me from slipping. Then I continued by thanking Him for a mirror, razor, deodorant, and on and on until I thanked Him for each of the articles of clothing He provided for me to wear.

And, then I thanked Him for the words of the Psalmist that reminded me of His promise: "no good thing will He withhold from those whose walk is blameless."

It was then that I had to pause in deep humility and gratefully thank Him for His love and grace that I do not deserve but desperately need. It is so easy for me to accept the gifts of God - including my salvation - without realizing that everything I have, or ever had or will have, are gifts from God.

And, as I reflected on that verse, the word blameless kept ringing in my ears as though it was my friendly alarm clock. I, of all people, am certainly not blameless. As I meditated on the word blameless for a few minutes and thought about everything I am or have, it's not because I am blameless. It's because His life was blameless, and of His unending love, mercy, grace, and forgiveness!

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for loving us, saving us, and giving us everything we have. May we be ever mindful of Your love and grateful for Your gifts! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: No good thing will He withhold from those whose walk is blameless. Psalm 84:11c

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2020 Groton SD Community Events

- **CANCELLED** Groton Lions Club Easter Egg Hunt - City Park (Saturday a week before Easter Weekend)
- **CANCELLED** Dueling Piano's Baseball Fundraiser at the American Legion
- **CANCELLED** Fireman's Fun Night (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
- **POSTPONED** Front Porch 605 Rural Route Road Trip
- **CANCELLED** Father/Daughter dance.
- **CANCELLED** Spring City-Wide Rummage Sales, (1st Saturday in May)
- **CANCELLED** Girls High School Golf Meet at Olive Grove Golf Course
- 05/25/2020 Groton American Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services
- 07/04/2020 Firecracker Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course
- 07/12/2020 Summer Fest/Car Show
- 07/16/2020 Olive Grove Golf Course Pro Am Golf Tourney
- 07/24/2020 Olive Grove Golf Course Ferney Open Golf Tourney
- 07/25/2020 City-Wide Rummage Sales
- **CANCELLED** State American Legion Baseball Tournament in Groton
- 08/07/2020 Wine on Nine Event at Olive Grove Golf Course
- 09/12-13/2020 Groton Fly-In/Drive-In at the Groton Airport north of 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)
- 10/30/2020 Downtown Trick or Treat
- 10/30/2020 Groton United Methodist Trunk or Treat
- **CANCELLED** Groton Legion Annual Turkey Party (Saturday closest to Veteran's Day)
- 11/26/2020 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center
- 12/05/2020 Olive Grove Golf Course Tour of Homes & Holiday Party
- 12/05/2020 Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services
- 01/--/2021 83rd Annual Carnival of Silver Skates

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News from the  Associated Press

Scheierman leads South Dakota State past Utah State 83-59

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Baylor Scheierman had a career-high 23 points as South Dakota State defeated Utah State 83-59 on Thursday night in the Bad Boy Mowers Crossover Classic.

Douglas Wilson had 16 points and Alex Arians added 13 points for South Dakota State (1-1). David Wingett had 11 points.

Neemias Queta had 12 points, three assists and three blocks for the Aggies (0-2). Marco Anthony added 10 points.

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

This was generated by Automated Insights, <http://www.automatedinsights.com/ap>, using data from STATS LLC, <https://www.stats.com>

The Latest: Emperor's New Year greeting cancelled in Japan

By The Associated Press undefined

TOKYO — Japanese Emperor Naruhito and his family will not offer their New Year greetings from the palace balcony due to concerns over the country's struggles with a resurgence of coronavirus infections.

The Imperial Household Agency said in a statement Friday that the annual greetings on Jan. 2 will not be held. The event traditionally draws tens of thousands of well-wishers to the palace garden. The greeting was last canceled in 1990 following the death of Naruhito's grandfather.

Emperor Naruhito and his family have rarely made public appearances since the pandemic began, due to cancelation of palace events.

Experts have urged the government to reduce social and business activity before the holiday season because of a rise in serious coronavirus cases.

HERE'S WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE VIRUS OUTBREAK:

- Americans risk traveling over Thanksgiving despite warnings
- Congress braces for Biden's national coronavirus strategy
- Pandemic gave locals fleeting taste of a tourist-free Hawaii
- To avoid any traces of the coronavirus that might be lurking on surfaces, Americans have been wiping down groceries, wearing surgical gloves in public and leaving mail packages out for an extra day or two. But experts say the national fixation on scrubbing can sometimes be overkill.
- California has reported a record number of coronavirus cases on the eve of Thanksgiving. More than 18,000 COVID-19 infections were reported Wednesday.
- Though the first real snow has yet to fall across much of Europe, ski buffs are imagining with dread a bizarre scene: Skiing in Zermatt in Switzerland while lifts idle across the border in Italy's Aosta valley.

Follow AP's coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic> and <https://apnews.com/UnderstandingtheOutbreak>

HERE'S WHAT ELSE IS HAPPENING:

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korea's daily coronavirus tally is above 500 for a second straight day and the country's prime minister is urging the public to stay at home this weekend to contain a viral resurgence.

Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun said Friday that people should avoid social gatherings and refrain from going out in public this weekend. South Korea has seen a spike in fresh infections since it eased tough

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social distancing rules last month.

Authorities reported 569 newly confirmed infections over the past 24 hours, raising the country's total to 32,887 for the pandemic, with 516 deaths. The 583 new cases reported Thursday was the first time that South Korea's daily tally had exceeded 500 since March.

ST. LOUIS — More Missouri counties in the region around St. Louis are imposing mandates requiring the use of face masks as coronavirus cases and hospitalizations surge.

The move comes amid an unsuccessful campaign by health officials in that area to get Gov. Mike Parson to require masks statewide.

Jefferson County, just south of St. Louis, is the latest to adopt a mask mandate. Neighboring Franklin County passed a mask order last week, and Boone County adopted a similar requirement earlier this week. Also this week, St. Charles County officials ordered an 11 p.m. closing time for bars and restaurants.

On Thursday, state officials reported 4,471 new confirmed cases, bringing the total to 287,263. Since the pandemic started, 3,808 people have died of COVID-19.

NEW YORK — New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo says officials are working on a winter plan for the coronavirus that will add metrics for how the state designates virus hot zones.

On Thursday, Cuomo said the state will continue homing in on small geographic areas where virus cases are a particular problem to avoid imposing broad statewide restrictions, considering factors such as the hospitalization rate and the availability of ICU beds.

The new plan will add factors like the hospitalization rate and the availability of ICU beds to determine the location of the hot spots.

Cuomo said the winter plan will also look at ways to keep schools open, evaluating a safe positivity rate as well as determining the levels of testing needed at schools over the winter months. The plan will also outline how vaccines will be distributed as they become available.

DES MOINES, Iowa — Iowa added 41 COVID-19 deaths Thursday as three more long-term care facilities reported virus outbreaks.

KCCI reports that the Iowa Department of Public Health reported 3,331 new positive COVID-19 cases as of 10 a.m. to bring the total to 222,278. The latest deaths raised the pandemic total to 2,312.

Long-term care facilities have been particularly hard hit, with cases in them accounting for 1,038 of the state's 2,312 deaths. The three new facilities reporting outbreaks brings the total that have been hit to 152.

Health department data also shows fewer Iowa counties are reporting a 14-day positivity rate greater than 15%. There are now 88 counties with a rate at 15% or higher, down from 91 the day before. Schools in those counties can apply for a waiver to provide 100% distance instruction.

LAWRENCE, Kan. — The number of Kansas counties that require face coverings has risen sharply as fewer opted out of Gov. Laura Kelly's latest mask mandate.

Sixty-two Kansas counties now have orders in place, with many coming as Kelly's new statewide mask order went into effect Wednesday, according to a list compiled by the Kansas Association of Counties. The remaining 43 of the counties have opted out, but most are encouraging or recommending people wear masks, The Kansas City Star reports.

It's a stark contrast to the response Kelly received to her first mask order in July, when the majority of counties opted out.

Meanwhile, a Lawrence hotel will serve as a shelter for individuals who need to quarantine or isolate after a positive COVID-19 test or exposure to a positive case, a press release from Douglas County and its Unified Command partners said.

The Kansas Division of Emergency Management is providing funding for shelter services at the Baymont Inn and Suites, the Lawrence Journal-World reports. It's available to homeless individuals, those who cannot safely isolate or quarantine at home due to numerous people living in the same home and first

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responders and those who work in high-risk professions.

PIERRE, S.D. — One group of South Dakotans marked the Thanksgiving holiday by setting up a makeshift memorial near the state Capitol in Pierre for those who have died from COVID-19.

A group called Stop the Spread set up over 800 empty chairs on the Capitol grounds, representing each person who has died. The state has tallied 849 COVID-19 deaths, with 424 of those deaths coming in November.

That death count is the 41st highest in the country overall, but the 11th highest per capita, according to Johns Hopkins researchers.

While the state maintained one of the nation's lowest death rates per capita throughout the summer and into the fall, a wave of cases has led to a skyrocketing rate of deaths in recent weeks.

MADRID — Spain's infection and fatality figures in the resurgence of COVID-19 are continuing to edge down, with the country posting 12,289 new cases and 337 deaths.

The 14-day cumulative number of COVID-19 cases per 100,000 of population, a recognized measure of the pandemic's spread, also fell Thursday, to 325.

That is far off the Nov. 9 peak during the resurgence, when it stood at 529, and comes amid nationwide measures restricting movement and social gatherings.

The government admits the trend is favorable but wants to maintain caution until its target rate of 25 cases per 100,000 of population is reached.

Spain's total number of new confirmed coronavirus cases stands at 1.6 million, with more than 44,000 deaths.

OTTAWA, Ontario — The chief medical adviser at Health Canada says Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine candidate could be approved in Canada next month.

Dr. Supriya Sharma says the Health Canada review is most advanced for the vaccine being developed by Pfizer and BioNTech. She says Canada is reviewing it alongside the United States and Europe, and expects it will be approved here at the same time it is given emergency authorization in the U.S.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration is meeting Dec. 10 to consider whether to give the go-ahead to Pfizer. Canada has a purchase deal to buy at least 20 million doses of Pfizer's vaccine, with the first four million of those on track to arrive before the end of March.

Sharma says she expects the first shipments of the Pfizer vaccine in January but it is possible Canada could begin receiving the first doses before the end of the year.

SANDPOINT, Idaho — A county commissioner in northern Idaho has proposed defunding the local health district after the district instituted a mask mandate to slow the spread of the coronavirus as it surges in the area.

The Bonner County Dailey reports that Bonner County Commissioner Steven Bradshaw proposed the resolution this week to pull about \$250,000 from the Panhandle Health District.

Commission Chairman Dan McDonald said the resolution will have to be placed on the agenda before it can be considered at next week's meeting.

The health district ordered the mask mandate on Nov. 19.

Bonner County Sheriff Daryl Wheeler says his agency won't enforce it.

BETHEL, Alaska -- The Alaska Native Medical Center, which specializes in health care for Alaska Native and American Indian people in the state, says it is now over capacity with coronavirus patients.

The center says it had to open an alternate care site to handle overflow.

The hospital's Acting Administrator Dr. Robert Onders said during a virtual town hall on Monday that the critical care unit is so flooded that it cannot hold all the hospital's most seriously ill patients.

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About 20% of coronavirus patients at the hospital require critical care. Onders said he expects the hospital's situation to worsen.

The Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta region had the highest coronavirus case rate in the state as of Tuesday with about 273 cases per 100,000 people across the region on Tuesday.

RENO, Nev. — The coroner in Reno fears the recent explosion of coronavirus cases in Nevada could soon overtake not only the ability to treat the sick, but also store the dead.

COVID-19 is now spreading so fast statewide that someone is confirmed to have contracted it every minute and someone else is dying from it about every two hours.

The Reno-Sparks area has recorded 59 COVID-19 deaths the last 30 days — half of those this past week. If the current trend continues, Washoe County Medical Examiner Laura Knight says the death rate could potentially double over the next two to three weeks, and double again by early January.

Statewide hospitalizations set another record Wednesday with 1,414 COVID-19 patients.

PARIS — France's health minister says his country is readying to start administering COVID-19 vaccines in late December. But Olivier Veran is warning Thursday that people will still have to wear masks and keep their distance even after vaccines are widely available.

Veran said he can't say yet whether mass vaccination "will allow us to get rid of this virus and totally return to our past lives," because it's not clear exactly how long protection from the eventual vaccines will last.

Noting broad skepticism in France about vaccine safety, he promised transparency about vaccination policy and to release plans soon on who will get the vaccine first and how.

President Emmanuel Macron has said France will not make COVID vaccines mandatory.

France leads Europe in numbers of confirmed virus infections, and has reported 50,618 virus-related deaths.

ROME — Italian health officials say the number of coronavirus patients both in intensive care and regular care beds has dropped. It's an encouraging sign for Italy's overtaxed hospitals during the surge in cases.

According to Health Ministry figures, 34,038 people in the country of more than 60 million were hospitalized in non-ICU beds Thursday, down 275 from Wednesday.

There were 3,846 ICU patients, two fewer than on the previous day.

On Thursday, 822 deaths were registered, raising the total to 52,850.

Although some 2,700 more swab tests were performed compared to the previous 24-hour period, the number of persons testing positive jumped by more than 3,000 Thursday.

With 29,003 new confirmed cases, Italy surpassed the 1.5 million mark in the pandemic Thursday, reaching 1,509,875.

Kuhse leads Saint Mary's (Cal) over Northern Iowa 66-64

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Tommy Kuhse made a game-winning basket with 1.8 seconds left to help Saint Mary's edge Northern Iowa 66-64 on Thursday in the Bad Boy Mowers Crossover Classic.

Kuhse, who had 19 points, six rebounds and three blocks, gave Saint Mary's its first lead since 12-11 with a bank shot in the lane.

Dan Fotu had 12 points and Alex Ducas added nine points and 10 rebounds for Saint Mary's (1-1).

AJ Green had 15 points for the Panthers (0-2). Austin Phyfe added 14 points and Bowen Born had 13 points.

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

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STATS LLC, <https://www.stats.com>

Culver powers No. 15 West Virginia past VCU in Sioux Falls

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — West Virginia missed its first 10 shots of the game. The Mountaineers still raced to a 13-0 lead over VCU.

Derek Culver had 23 points and 15 rebounds to help No. 15 West Virginia beat VCU 78-66 on Thursday in the Bad Boys Mowers Crossover Classic semifinals.

"I try to play hard on the defensive end and the offense was just going to follow," Culver said. "I just ended up getting in there and playing hard."

West Virginia (2-0) will face Western Kentucky in the final Friday.

"That's the neat thing about a tournament like this," West Virginia coach Bob Huggins said. "Three games in three days with three different styles of play, three different styles of coaching."

Culver rebounded from a seven-point game Wednesday night in the Mountaineers' opening victory over South Dakota State, finishing two shy of his career high. He was 8 of 14 from the field.

Sean McNeil added 16 points, and Oscar Tshiebwe had 11 points and 16 rebounds.

Nah'Shon Hyland led the Rams (1-1) with 13 points.

VCU missed its first nine shots, finally scoring on a goaltending call midway through the first half. The Rams rallied with a full-court press and cut it to two with five minutes left in the half.

West Virginia had 21 turnovers.

"We would have done a much better job if we would have time to prepare," Huggins said. "We haven't worked on a press breaker. We will, obviously. We're still awfully young. We're not quite as seasoned as some of the other people are."

West Virginia led by nine at the break. After the Rams cut it to three early in the second half, the Mountaineers opened a 16-point lead.

BIG PICTURE

West Virginia's length on the inside was again a factor. The Mountaineers had 23 offensive rebounds and scored 25 second-half points. They had 17 offensive rebounds and 18 second-chance points in their opener over South Dakota State.

UP NEXT

West Virginia: Vs. Western Kentucky in championship game Friday.

VCU: Vs Memphis in third-place game Friday.

Bassey scores 21 to lift Western Kentucky over Memphis 75-69

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Charles Bassey had 21 points, 14 rebounds and seven blocks as Western Kentucky beat Memphis 75-69 on Thursday.

Taveion Hollingsworth had 18 points for WKU (2-0). Carson Williams added 14 points and nine rebounds.

Landers Nolley II had 25 points, with six 3-pointers, for the Tigers (1-1). Boogie Ellis added 14 points and D.J. Jeffries had 10 rebounds.

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Group commemorates COVID-19 deaths at South Dakota Capitol

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — One group of South Dakotans marked the Thanksgiving holiday by setting up a makeshift memorial near the state Capitol in Pierre for those who have died from COVID-19.

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A group called Stop the Spread set up over 800 empty chairs on the Capitol grounds, representing each person who has died. The state has tallied 849 COVID-19 deaths, with 424 of those deaths coming in November.

That death count is the 41st highest in the country overall, but the 11th highest per capita, according to Johns Hopkins researchers.

While the state maintained one of the nation's lowest death rates per capita throughout the summer and into the fall, a wave of cases has led to a skyrocketing rate of deaths in recent weeks.

Over the past two weeks, the state saw a downward tick in new cases, with the rolling average number of daily new cases decreasing to 1,082. But the state has also reported the nation's second-highest number of new cases per capita, according to Johns Hopkins researchers. One in every 118 people in South Dakota tested positive in the past week.

The Department of Health did not provide an update to coronavirus cases on Thursday.

Black Friday offers beacon of hope to struggling stores

By ANNE D'INNOCENZIO AP Retail Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — After months of slumping sales and businesses toppling into bankruptcy, Black Friday is offering a small beacon of hope.

In normal times, Black Friday is the busiest shopping day of the year, drawing millions of shoppers eager to get started on their holiday spending.

But these are not normal times: The economy is tanking and crowds are expected to be dramatically diminished as coronavirus cases spike and shoppers do more of their purchases online.

Many retailers closed their doors on Thanksgiving Day but are beefing up their safety protocols to reassure wary customers that they can still come back the next day. For those who can't be reassured, stores are moving their doorbuster deals online and ramping up curbside pickup options as a last grasp at sales before the year ends and they head into the dark days of winter with the pandemic still raging.

"Black Friday is still critical," said Neil Saunders, managing director of GlobalData Retail. "No retailer wants it to be tarnished. It's still vital to get their consumers spending and get consumers into the holiday mood."

Macy's Herald Square in New York featured such deals as 50% off handbags and 60% off women's and men's coats, but there was just a trickle of shoppers at around 7 a.m., an hour after the store opened. There was no one in line at the service area where customers pick up their online orders. Workers could be seen sanitizing door knobs and windows. The scene looked similarly empty at the nearby Manhattan Mall.

At the Garden State Plaza mall in Paramus, New Jersey, parking spots were easy to find shortly after the mall opened at 7 a.m. Inside, there was a line at video game store GameStop and several police officers to control the crowd.

Things were quiet at a Walmart in Saddle Brook, New Jersey. The nation's largest retailer has been offering its best deals online this month to deter any crowds from showing up on Black Friday.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has labeled shopping in crowded stores during the holidays a "higher risk" activity and says people should limit any in-person shopping, including at supermarkets.

Instead, the health agency recommends shopping online, visiting outdoor markets or using curbside pickup, where workers bring orders to you in the parking lot.

The day after Thanksgiving has been losing its luster as the unofficial start to the holiday shopping season for the past several years, with more stores were offering holiday discounts throughout the month. Still, Black Friday has remained the busiest day of the year, according to ShopperTrak, and is expected to hold that title again this year.

The National Retail Federation, the nation's largest retail trade group, has taken an optimistic view, predicting that shoppers will be looking for reasons to celebrate. The trade group expects sales for the November and December period to increase between 3.6% and 5.2% over 2019 compared with a 4% increase the year before. Holiday sales have averaged gains of 3.5% over the past five years.

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"After all they've been through, we think there's going to be a psychological factor that they owe it to themselves and their families to have a better-than-normal holiday," said NRF Chief Economist Jack Kleinhenz. "There are risks to the economy if the virus continues to spread, but as long as consumers remain confident and upbeat, they will spend for the holiday season."

Retailers were successful in convincing shoppers to spend early by pushing big discounts in mid-October. And shoppers have shown their willingness to spend for other holidays like Easter and Halloween.

Online sales could realize even bigger gains heading into the holidays. Black Friday is projected to generate \$10 billion in online sales, a 39% bump from the year ago period, according to Adobe Analytics, which measures sales at 80 of the top 100 U.S. online retailers. And Cyber Monday, the Monday after Thanksgiving, will remain the biggest online shopping day of the year with \$12.7 billion in sales, a 35% jump.

The pandemic has already benefited Amazon, which continues to seal its dominance in the online space as jittery shoppers click on their devices instead of venturing into stores. Likewise, big box chains like Walmart and Target that were allowed to stay open during the spring lockdowns fared far better than department stores and other non-essential retailers that were forced to close. That disparity helped speed up bankruptcy filings of more than 40 chains, including J.C. Penney and J.Crew, and resulted in hundreds of stores closings.

Plenty of clothing chains like Abercrombie and Fitch have warned of more difficult days ahead, including the possibility of even more store closures. A&F said Tuesday it expects sales declines to deepen to 5% to 10% for the holiday quarter.

"There are a lot of unknowns as we head into what's our traditionally highest volume weeks of the year," Scott Lipesky, chief financial officer at Abercrombie & Fitch told analysts on its earnings call. "With COVID numbers rising, there is the potential for a change in apparel demand and customer willingness to enter physical stores."

Department stores and other clothing stores that haven't yet recovered from the closures during the spring will have a hard time making up for lost sales, says Ken Perkins, president of Retail Metrics LLC, a retail research firm.

For the fiscal third quarter, mall-based retailers saw their profits down 20% while big box stores and other retailers that operate outside a traditional mall posted a 19% increase, according to RetailMetrics' tally of roughly 100 retailers. For the fiscal fourth quarter, mall-based retailers are expected to see profits down 31%, while off-mall stores should see profits up 1%.

Ethiopian PM rejects Tigray conflict talks in AU meeting

By CARA ANNA Associated Press

NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) — Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed again ruled out dialogue with the leaders of the defiant Tigray region Friday but said he was willing to speak to representatives "operating legally" there during his meeting with three African Union special envoys trying to end the deadly conflict between federal troops and the region's forces.

The meeting came as more people fled Tigray's capital city ahead of a promised "final phase" of the army's offensive. Meanwhile, the number of people managing to cross the border into Sudan has slowed to a trickle, raising concerns they are being blocked from leaving.

The Nobel Peace Prize-winning prime minister, who has resisted international mediation as "interference," said he appreciated the AU envoys' "elderly concern" but told them his government's failure to enforce the rule of law in Tigray would "nurture a culture of impunity with devastating cost to the survival of the country," according to his office. Abiy's government and the regional one run by the Tigray People's Liberation Front each consider the other illegitimate.

There was no immediate word from the three AU envoys, former Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, former Mozambique President Joaquim Chissano and former South African President Kgalema Motlanthe. AU spokeswoman Ebba Kalondo did not say whether they can meet with TPLF leaders, something Abiy's office has rejected.

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"Not possible," senior Ethiopian official Redwan Hussein said in a message to the AP. "Above all, TPLF leadership is still at large." He called reports that the TPLF had appointed an envoy to discuss an immediate cease-fire with the international community "masquerading."

Fighting reportedly remained well outside the Tigray capital of Mekele, a densely populated city of a half-million people who have been warned by the Ethiopian government that they will be shown "no mercy" if they don't distance themselves from the region's leaders.

Tigray has been almost entirely cut off from the outside world since Nov. 4, when Abiy announced a military offensive in response to a TPLF attack on a military base. That makes it difficult to verify claims about the fighting, but humanitarians have said at least hundreds of people have been killed.

The fighting threatens to destabilize Ethiopia, which has been described as the linchpin of the strategic Horn of Africa.

With transport links cut, food and other supplies are running out in Tigray, home to 6 million people, and the United Nations has asked for immediate and unimpeded access for aid.

Multiple crises are growing. More than 40,000 refugees have fled for Sudan, where people struggle to give them food, shelter and care. One humanitarian agency says hospitals in Tigray are running out of drugs. And fighting near camps of Eritrean refugees in northern Ethiopia has put them in the line of fire.

Worryingly, refugees in Sudan have told The Associated Press that Ethiopian forces near the border are impeding people from leaving. Reporters from the AP have seen that crossings have slowed to a trickle in recent days. Ethiopia's government has not commented on that.

Nearly half of the refugees are children. The spread of COVID-19 is just one concern.

"We cannot keep social distancing here in the camp," said Mohammed Rafik Nasri, from the U.N. refugee agency. "It is really challenging among the several issues in need that are growing because the number is growing. Today we are receiving a convoy of 1,000 arriving in the camp. And shelter is one of the biggest challenges that we have at the moment."

Scared, sometimes without word of loved ones left behind, the refugees continue to share horrific accounts of the fighting.

"The country has no peace. You see one tribe killing another. It is so hard," said one, Atsbaha Gtsadik.

Meanwhile, some of the tens of thousands of refugees from Eritrea who are living in northern Ethiopia have been in the line of fire as fighting sweeps by them.

"Reports of conflicts around refugee camps are very concerning," said Juliette Stevenson, a spokeswoman with the U.N. refugee agency. Communications and transport restrictions make it impossible to verify camp conditions, she said.

But the 96,000 Eritrean refugees "will run out of food as soon as Monday if supplies cannot reach them," the agency said in a statement.

The International Committee for the Red Cross, in a rare dispatch from inside Tigray, warned that health care facilities are running out of drugs and other supplies and health workers need help caring for the wounded.

While traveling in western Tigray, the ICRC found a number of displaced people living in a makeshift camp without food, water or medical care. "They told us they feared for their lives, and that they wanted safe passage out of the area."

Its statement added: "So much is still unknown on the level of violence and subsequent suffering that people in the Tigray region have endured in just three weeks."

Associated Press journalist Fay Abuelgasim in Umm Rakouba, Sudan, contributed to this report.

Cher in Pakistan to help 'world's loneliest elephant'

By KATHY GANNON Associated Press

ISLAMABAD (AP) — Iconic singer and actress Cher is in Pakistan to celebrate the departure of Kaavan, dubbed the "world's loneliest elephant," who will soon leave a Pakistani zoo for better conditions after

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years of lobbying by animal rights groups and activists.

Because of security concerns, Cher's schedule was not made public. However, she met Friday with Prime Minister Imran Khan and was expected to visit Kaavan later in the trip, according to the prime minister's office. Khan's office released a video of the singer sitting with the prime minister outside on the expansive grounds of Khan's residence.

Kaavan, the elephant has languished in the zoo for 35 years, and lost his partner in 2012. He was diagnosed by veterinarians as both overweight and malnourished, and also suffers behavioral issues due to his isolation.

Kaavan is set to leave for a sanctuary in Cambodia on Sunday, said Martin Bauer of Four Paws International, a global animal welfare group that's led the charge to save him since 2016.

Cher took up Kaavan's cause and has been a loud voice advocating for his resettlement. Four Paws, which often carries out animal rescue missions, has provided the medical treatment needed before Kaavan can travel and will accompany him to the sanctuary.

Even after he's in Cambodia, he'll require years of physical and even psychological assistance, Bauer said.

Because of the abysmal living conditions blamed on systemic negligence, Pakistan's high court in May ordered the closure of Marghazar Zoo in the capital of Islamabad, where Kaavan has lived for much of his life.

A medical examination in September showed Kaavan's nails were cracked and overgrown — the result of years of living in an improper enclosure with flooring that damaged his feet.

The elephant has also developed stereotypical behavior, shaking his head back and forth for hours, which the medical team of wildlife veterinarians and experts blamed on his utter boredom.

For the past three months, a Four Paws team including veterinarian Dr. Amil Khalil and the Islamabad Wildlife Management Board has been readying Kaavan to leave.

Khalil first met Kaavan in 2016, and returned to the zoo in August, where he was heartbroken at the animal's condition. Khalil has spent the last three months trying to get him ready for his trip to Cambodia.

Kaavan was put on a diet of fruit and vegetables, and as a result has lost half a ton (450 kilograms), he said. Previously, Kaavan was eating 250 kilograms (550 pounds) of pure sugar cane every day, with an occasional fruit and vegetable.

The veterinarian said this was the first time in 30 years that he developed an strong emotional bond with a rescue animal. Now, the "world's loneliest elephant" comes lumbering over when he hears Khalil's voice.

"I was always moving, so never allowed myself to develop an emotional attachment," but with Kaavan he couldn't resist, Khalil said. He said he has pampered and protected him for the past three months, cajoling him into losing weight as well as being less fidgety and more relaxed so he can make the trip to Cambodia.

Khalil said there are many elephants at the sanctuary, but in particular three female elephants are awaiting Kaavan's arrival.

Khalil joked that Kaavan might just find a girlfriend there — who knows?

Bauer lauded the powerful impact celebrity voices can have for animal rights.

"Celebrities lending their voices to good causes are always welcomed, as they help starting public discourse and raising pressure on responsible authorities," he said.

"Around the globe there are animal lovers, famous and not famous, and the support of every single one of them is crucial," he added.

Biden's win hides a dire warning for Democrats in rural U.S.

By THOMAS BEAUMONT Associated Press

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — Democrats once dominated Koochiching County in the blue-collar Iron Range of northern Minnesota. But in this month's presidential election, President Donald Trump won it with 60% of the vote.

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That's not because voters there are suddenly shifting to the right, said Tom Bakk, who represents the area in the state Senate. It's because, he said, Democrats have steadily moved too far to the left for many rural voters.

"We've got to see if we can get the Democratic Party to moderate and accept the fact that rural Minnesota is not getting more conservative," said Bakk, who announced last week that he would become an independent after serving 25 years as a Democrat. "It's that you guys are leaving them behind."

While Democrats powered through cities and suburbs to reclaim the White House, the party slid further behind in huge rural swaths of northern battlegrounds. The party lost House seats in the Midwest, and Democratic challengers in Iowa, Kansas, Montana and North Carolina Senate races, all once viewed as serious threats to Republican incumbents, fell, some of them hard.

Though Democrats' rural woes aren't new, they now heap pressure on Biden to begin reversing the trend. Failure to do so endangers goals such as curbing climate change and winning a Senate majority, especially with GOP Senate seats in Iowa, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin up in 2022.

"The pressure for Democrats has to be on conveying an economic message for rural America," said Iowa Democrat John Norris, a former candidate for governor. "We have a great one to convey, but we haven't put enough emphasis on it."

It has become a defining dynamic in almost every state where Democrats dominate urban areas and, for at least two elections, have clear momentum in the suburbs.

While Trump sought to squeeze more out of his mostly white, working-class base, he made little ground in places he barely won or lost in 2016, and slid in suburbs across the industrial and agricultural north. Instead, he supercharged his focus on places he won big last times.

Trump lost Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania, after winning all three in 2016. But he won at least 60% of the vote in 126 counties in the three — 14 more than in 2016, according to Associated Press and state elections data. All of those counties are lightly populated.

Perhaps more telling, Trump increased his winning percentages in 90% of the counties where he reached the 60% mark in those three states four years ago. That includes all 24 counties where he won at least 70% of the vote last time, even while Biden was vastly outspending Trump on advertising.

The rural runaway was even greater in Iowa and Ohio, where polls late in October gave Biden's campaign hopes of a close race or narrow win, only to see him lose them by the same margins Clinton did.

Trump's greater dominance in rural Ohio surprised even Republican strategists. In Ohio's 6th Congressional District, 18 counties that hug the Pennsylvania border and Ohio River, Trump improved from 64% of the vote to more than 66%.

"I'll be the first to say I was doubtful President Trump could exceed what he did in 2016," said Ryan Steubenrauch, a senior adviser to 6th District Republican Rep. Bill Johnson.

Though Biden fulfilled Democrats' long-sought goal of carrying Georgia and Arizona, albeit narrowly, it wasn't because he concentrated on reaching beyond their metro hubs, said Steve Jarding, a veteran Democratic strategist who has long argued for greater party engagement in rural America.

"Democrats have found a way to win in the country, at least they believe this to be the case, by not concentrating much in big parts of the middle of the country," he said. "That's a scary proposition."

Jarding worries that by winning Arizona, Georgia and the northern swing states without addressing the rural economy, Democrats might believe the states are now trending their way as the result of favorable population and demographic shifts.

"We didn't win Georgia because we had a great message to rural Georgians," said Jarding, who helped Mark Warner win the Virginia governorship in 2001 by advising him to campaign aggressively far from the booming Washington, D.C., suburbs. "If Democrats say, look, we got into Georgia and we won it without having to talk about rural issues, they are dead wrong. It will flip back."

In clinging to their majority, House Democrats lost rural seats, notably the one held for 30 years by Rep. Collin Peterson in western Minnesota. The setbacks prompted accusations from moderates that the party's prominent liberals, such as New York Rep. Alexandria Ocasio Cortez, had become representative of a party foreign to America's farming and small manufacturing towns.

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"I would argue everyone talks about the big tent. It's not as big as it used to be," Minnesota's Bakk said. Biden campaigned little in person, even less in rural areas. Trump, on the other hand, whipped up enthusiasm at rallies in places like Wausau, Wisconsin, in the state's rural north where he dominated, as well as Saginaw in Mid Michigan, and Johnstown, Pennsylvania, surrounded by counties he carried by more than 70%, even 80%.

Democrats also spent little time and money combatting Trump's attacks.

Unanswered, Trump's claims that Biden and other Democrats are proponents of socialism and eliminating police departments, as unfounded as they were, resonated in small towns, according to VoteCast, an Associated Press survey of the American electorate conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago.

"We have to address this in a really more aggressive way," said veteran Democratic strategist James Carville, especially Trump's claims that Democrats are anti-police. "There were some serious kind of headwinds there."

Democrats need to not just defend against attacks but recruit more candidates among rural Americans and argue that progressive policy is to their advantage.

"We obviously have a brand problem in rural America," said former North Dakota Sen. Heidi Heitkamp, a Democrat defeated in 2018. "But if you want to be an alternative, you can't go there empty-handed."

Heitkamp credits Biden for including specifically rural provisions in his policy plans, such as a transportation component in his health care proposal, considering many people in sparsely populated areas must travel some distance to see a doctor.

For now, Democrats' future in rural America rests largely on how Biden is viewed there, Heitkamp said.

"A good way to start out would be to make sure in his inaugural speech and state of the union, he talks about rural America," she said.

Keep cool: Germany preps vaccine drive as COVID cases hit 1M

By FRANK JORDANS and CHRISTOPH NOELTING Associated Press

TUTTlingen, Germany (AP) — Hulking gray boxes are rolling off the production line at a factory in the southern town of Tuttlingen, ready to be shipped to the front in the next phase of Germany's battle against the coronavirus as it became the latest country to hit the milestone of 1 million confirmed cases Friday.

Man-sized freezers such as those manufactured by family-owned firm Binder GmbH could become a key part of the vast immunization program the German government is preparing to roll out when the first vaccines become available next month.

That's because one of the front-runners in the race for a vaccine is BioNTech, a German company that together with U.S. pharmaceutical giant Pfizer has developed a shot it says is up to 96% effective in trials but comes with a small hitch: it needs to be cooled to minus 70 degrees Celsius (minus 94 degrees Fahrenheit) for shipping and storage.

Ensuring such temperatures, colder even than an Antarctic winter, is just one of the many challenges that countries face in trying to get their populations immunized.

The effort has been compared to a military operation. Indeed some countries, including Germany, are relying on military and civilian expertise to ensure the precious doses are safely transported from manufacturing plants to secret storage facilities, before being distributed.

Germany has benefited from the market power that comes with being a member of the European Union. The 27-nation bloc's executive Commission — led by former German Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen — has spearheaded negotiations with vaccine makers, ordering more than a billion doses so far.

German officials have said the country hopes to secure up to 300 million doses from the EU orders and bilateral deals with three manufacturers in Germany, including BioNTech and CureVac, a company based in Tuebingen that says its vaccine can be stored at regular refrigerator temperatures for up to three months. Its trials are not as far along, however, as Pfizer/BioNTech and others.

The figure of 300 million is contingent on all vaccines being developed making it to market. That would be more than enough to immunize Germany's population of 83 million, even if two shots are required, as

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seems likely.

How exactly the vaccine is delivered to patients differs from country to country. In Germany, the federal government has delegated the task to its 16 states, which are now working to build large vaccination centers.

The city-state of Berlin has drafted in Albrecht Broemme, a veteran of disaster management. The former Berlin fire chief later led Germany's federal civil protection organization THW, where he helped organize disaster relief operations for floods, storms and quakes around the world.

The 67-year-old is now coordinating the setting-up of six vaccine hubs in Berlin in a convention center, two former airports, an ice skating rink, a concert hall and an indoor cycle race track.

Authorities want them ready by mid-December to begin vaccinating more than 3,000 people per day at each location. With just a few minutes to deliver each shot and mindful of keeping the number of people in each center at a minimum, Broemme and his colleagues are devising a one-way flow system similar to that found in large stores like furniture company Ikea.

Each site will be run by a medical aid group, such as the Red Cross, with volunteers to help register and guide people through the venue.

Like elsewhere, the first phase of vaccination in Berlin will likely focus on immunizing health care workers and vulnerable groups such as the elderly and those with chronic illnesses. About 20,000 people will be vaccinated each day, returning after three weeks for a booster shot.

Demand is likely to outstrip supply at first, but that will change as more vaccines come onto the market.

"We're hopeful that approvals in the field of vaccination will be issued very quickly," German Chancellor Angela Merkel told parliament on Thursday. "That won't solve the problem immediately, but there's a light at the end of the tunnel."

Broemme has said he expects four-fifths of the vaccines initially available to need ultra-low cooling. That means every center will need a pharmacy that handles both the storage and thawing of vaccines.

At the other end of the country in Tuttlingen, Binder GmbH, one of hundreds of medical device manufacturers in the town, some with a history dating back to the 19th century, is seeing demand for its freezers surge.

Priced at 13,000-15,000 euros (\$15,500-17,900), each device can keep tens of thousands of vials of vaccine at optimum temperature, says Peter Wimmer, the company's head of innovation.

"It's plug and play," he told the AP. "All you need is an electrical socket, switch it on and the device is ready to go."

Having the whole vaccination system ready to go at the touch of a button is a different matter, though.

It is still unclear who will actually administer the vaccines in Berlin. Unlike Britain, which has a centralized National Health Service organizing the immunization drive, Germany is relying on doctors associations to provide the necessary medical staff.

Doerthe Arnold, a spokeswoman for the Berlin branch of Germany's Association of Statutory Health Insurance Physicians, said they are still waiting for the state government to provide details on what will be required of doctors.

"Despite the positive feedback from doctors practices that they're willing to help out even more, providing medical personnel for the six vaccination centers will be a challenge," she said.

The limits of medical logistics were tested in spring, when huge worldwide demand for ventilators, therapeutic drugs, face masks and other protective equipment prompted bidding wars, bottlenecks and reports of faulty products.

Global logistics company DHL estimates that to provide worldwide coverage of vaccines over the coming two years may require 15,000 flights.

"The challenge is the sheer number of doses and the fact that it's not clear which vaccine needs to go where," Sabine Hartmann, a DHL spokeswoman, told The AP. "It's not something a single company can do on its own. All logistics companies have to work together on this."

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Jordans reported from Berlin.

Follow AP coverage of the virus outbreak at <https://apnews.com/VirusOutbreak> and <https://apnews.com/UnderstandingtheOutbreak>

Lawmakers throw pig guts, punches on Taiwan parliament floor

TAIPEI, Taiwan (AP) — Lawmakers in Taiwan got into a fist fight and threw pig guts at each other Friday over a soon-to-be enacted policy that would allow imports of U.S. pork and beef.

Premier Su Tseng-chang was due to give a regularly scheduled policy report to lawmakers on Friday morning about the pork policy when opposition party lawmakers from the Nationalist party, also known as the KMT, blocked his attempt to speak by dumping bags of pig organs. Legislators from the ruling Democratic Progressive Party attempted to stop them, resulting in chaos and an exchange of punches.

A DPP lawmaker wrestled a KMT lawmaker to the floor in the scuffle.

President Tsai Ing-wen's administration lifted a longstanding ban on imports of U.S. pork and beef in August, in a move seen as one of the first steps toward possibly negotiating a bilateral trade agreement with the U.S. The ban is due to be lifted in January.

That decision has met with fierce opposition, both from the KMT and individual citizens. The new policy allows imports of pork with acceptable residues of ractopamine, a drug that some farmers add to animal feed that promotes the growth of lean meat.

On Sunday, thousands of people marched in Taipei to protest the imports.

U.S. pork would account for a small percentage of the island's consumption, but the Nationalist party has seized on the issue in an effort to mobilize support following successive failures at the polls.

"When you were in the opposition, you were against U.S. pork, now that you're in power, you've become a supporter of U.S. pork," said KMT legislator Lin Wei-chou, who led the group of lawmakers protesting the policy on Friday. They wore black T-shirts that read "oppose ractopamine-pork."

DPP lawmakers called for peace. "You have blocked Premier Su from reposting to the parliament for 12 times," said Hsu Sheng-chieh, a DPP legislative member. "Please return to reason."

S. Korea agency says N. Korea executed people, shut capital

By HYUNG-JIN KIM Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has ordered at least two people executed, banned fishing at sea and locked down the capital, Pyongyang, as part of frantic efforts to guard against the coronavirus and its economic damage, South Korea's spy agency told lawmakers Friday.

Kim's government also ordered diplomats overseas to refrain from any acts that could provoke the United States because it is worried about President-elect Joe Biden's expected new approach toward North Korea, lawmakers told reporters after attending a private briefing by the National Intelligence Service.

One of the lawmakers, Ha Tae-keung, quoted the NIS as saying Kim is displaying "excessive anger" and taking "irrational measures" over the pandemic and its economic impact.

Ha said the NIS told lawmakers that North Korea executed a high-profile money changer in Pyongyang last month after holding the person responsible for a falling exchange rate. He quoted the NIS as saying that North Korea also executed a key official in August for violating government regulations restricting goods brought from abroad. The two people weren't identified by name.

North Korea has also banned fishing and salt production at sea to prevent seawater from being infected with the virus, the NIS told lawmakers.

North Korea recently placed Pyongyang and northern Jagang province under lockdown over virus concerns. Earlier this month, it imposed lockdown measures in other areas where officials found unauthorized goods and foreign currencies that were brought in, Ha cited the NIS as saying.

North Korea also made an unsuccessful hacking attempt on at least one South Korean pharmaceutical

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company that was trying to develop a coronavirus vaccine, the NIS said.

The agency has a mixed record in confirming developments in North Korea, one of the world's most secretive nations. The NIS said it couldn't immediately confirm the lawmakers' accounts.

North Korea has maintained that it hasn't found a single coronavirus case on its soil, a claim disputed by outside experts, although it says it is making all-out efforts to prevent the virus's spread. A major outbreak could have dire consequences because the North's health care system remains crippled and suffers from a chronic lack of medical supplies.

The pandemic forced North Korea to seal its border with China, its biggest trading partner and aid benefactor, in January. The closure, along with a series of natural disasters over the summer, dealt a heavy blow to the North's economy, which has been under punishing U.S.-led sanctions.

North Korea's trade with China in the first 10 months of this year totaled \$530 million, about 25% of the corresponding figure last year. The price of sugar and seasoning has shot up four times, Ha quoted the NIS as saying.

North Korea monitoring groups in Seoul said the North Korean won-to-dollar exchange rate has recently fallen significantly because people found few places to use foreign currency after smuggling was largely cut off following the closure of the China border.

According to the NIS briefing, North Korea ordered overseas diplomatic missions not to provoke the United States, warning their ambassadors of consequences if their comments or acts related to the U.S. cause any trouble in ties with Washington.

North Korea's government has remained silent over Biden's election victory over President Donald Trump, with whom Kim held three summits in 2018-19 over the North's nuclear arsenal. While the diplomacy eventually stalled, the meetings helped Kim and Trump build up personal ties and stop the crude insults and threats of destruction they had previously exchanged.

Lawmaker Kim Byung-kee cited the NIS as saying that North Korea is displaying anxiety as its friendly ties with Trump become useless and it has to start from scratch in dealing with the incoming Biden administration.

Experts have been debating whether North Korea will resume major missile tests soon to try to get Biden's attention. During past government changes in the U.S., North Korea often conducted big weapons launches in an attempt to increase its leverage in negotiations with a new U.S. administration.

The NIS expects North Korea will hold a military parade ahead of a ruling party congress in January in a show of force timed with Biden's inauguration. North Korea is also likely to use the Workers' Party congress to lay out its basic policies toward the U.S., Kim Byung-kee cited the NIS as saying.

Kim Jong Un has said the congress, the first of its kind in four years, will set new state objectives for the next five years. In a highly unusual admission of its policy failure in August, the Workers' Party said North Korea's economy had not improved due to severe internal and external barriers and that its previous developmental goals had been seriously delayed.

This story has been corrected to show that North Korea closed its border with China in January, not June.

In Santa's mailbag, a peek into children's pandemic worries

By JOHN LEICESTER Associated Press

LIBOURNE, France (AP) — Jim, from Taiwan, slipped a face mask inside the greeting card he sent to Santa and marked "I (heart) u." Alina, 5, asked in her Santa letter written with an adult's help that he please use the front door when he drops in, because the back door is reserved for Grandma and Grandpa to minimize their risk of contamination.

And spilling out her heavy little heart to "Dear Father Christmas," 10-year-old Lola wrote that she is wishing "that my aunt never has cancer again and that this virus no longer exists."

"My mother is a care-giver and sometimes I am scared for her," Lola explained, signing off her handwritten letter with, "Take care of yourself Father Christmas, and of the Elves."

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The emotional toll wrought by the pandemic is jumping off pages in the deluge of "Dear Santa" letters now pouring into a post office in southwest France that sorts and responds to his mail from around the world.

Arriving by the tens of thousands, the letters, notes and cards — some mere scribbles, other elaborate labors of love in colored pens — are revealing windows into the tender minds of their young authors, and of adult Santa fans also asking for respite and happiness, at the tail end of a year of sickness and tumult.

Like this letter from young Zoe, who limited her requests to a music player and amusement park tickets because "this year has been very different from others because of COVID-19."

"That's why I am not asking you for many thing(s) to avoid infection," Zoe wrote, signing off with "Merci!" and a heart.

In theory, and often in practice, any letter addressed "Pere Noel" — French for Father Christmas — and slipped into any post box around the world is likely to wend its way to the sorting office in France's Bordeaux region that has been handling his mail since 1962. Toiling out of sight among vineyards, his secretariat of workers (who call themselves "elves") spends the months of November and December slicing open envelopes decorated with hearts, stickers and colors, and spreading Santa magic by responding on his behalf.

From the first letters opened at the secretariat from Nov. 12, it quickly became apparent how the pandemic is weighing on children, says the chief elf, Jamila Hajji. Along with the usual pleas for toys and gadgets were also requests for vaccines, for visits from grandparents, for life to return to the way it was. One letter in three mentions the pandemic in some way, Hajji says.

"The kids have been very affected by COVID, more than we think. They are very worried. And what they want most of all, apart from presents, is really to be able to have a normal life, the end of COVID, a vaccine," she says.

"The letters to Father Christmas are a sort of release for them. All this year, they have been in lockdowns, they have been deprived of school, deprived of their grandpas and grandmas. Their parents have been occupied by the health crisis and whatnot. So we, of course, can tell that the children are putting into words everything they have felt during this period."

"We are like elf therapists," she adds.

Replying to 12,000 letters per day, the team of 60 elves sets aside some that move them or catch the eye. Lola's is among those that have stood out so far, with its heartfelt confession to Santa that "this year more than the others, I need magic and to believe in you." The elves say their sense is that children are confiding worries that they may not have shared with parents.

Emma Barron, a psychiatrist specializing in the mental health of children and adolescents at the Robert Debré pediatric hospital in Paris, says landmark dates, including birthdays and holidays like Christmas, provide structure in childhood. Amid the pandemic's uncertainty, the Dec. 25 anchor of Christmas is particularly important to kids this year.

"Children are quite surprising in that they can adapt to many things," Barron says. "But rhythms, rituals and things like that are an integral part of children's mental stability."

As the letters flood in, it's also clear that this goes beyond childhood. Santa is proving a beacon to adults, too, with some writing to him for the first time since they were kids.

One asked for "a pandemic of love." A 77-year-old lamented that "lockdown is no fun! I live alone." A grandparent asked Santa to "say 'Hi' to my two grandkids that I won't be able to see this year because of the health situation."

"Your mission will be hard this year," wrote Anne-Marie, another adult suppliant. "You will need to sprinkle stars across the entire world, to calm everyone and revive our childhood souls, so we can dream, at last, and let go."

Follow AP's virus coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic> and <https://apnews.com/UnderstandingtheOutbreak>

Families of 6 Americans convicted in Venezuela cry foul

By SCOTT SMITH ASSOCIATED PRESS

CARACAS, Venezuela (AP) — Hopes of families for a quick release for six American oil executives detained in Venezuela for three years over an alleged corruption scheme have evaporated, with a judge finding them all guilty and quickly sentencing them to prison.

Attorneys and relatives of the so-called Citgo 6 said the men were wrongly convicted, and the defense lawyers vowed to appeal Thursday's verdicts.

Alirio Rafael Zambrano, whose two brothers were among the defendants, said they were "undeniably innocent" and victims of "judicial terrorism." No evidence presented in the case supports a guilty conviction, he said.

"We, the family, are heartbroken to be separated even further from our loved ones," Zambrano said by phone from New Jersey. "We pray that the leaders of our nation step forward and continue to fight unceasingly for their freedom and human rights."

Attorney María Alejandra Poleo, who helped represent three of the men, said the case was "void of evidence." "Of course, the defense will appeal the decision," she said.

The so-called Citgo 6 are employees of Houston-based Citgo refining company, which is owned by Venezuela's state oil company, PDVSA. They had been lured to Venezuela three years ago for a business meeting and were arrested on corruption charges.

Their arrest launched a purge by President Nicolás Maduro's government of PDVSA and at a time when relations between Caracas and Washington were crumbling as Venezuela plummeted into economic and social crisis.

Five of the men were sentenced to prison terms of 8 years and 10 months, while one of them received a 13-year sentence. Defense attorney Jesus Loreto said the five with lesser terms could be released on parole in a couple of years.

Venezuela's Supreme Tribunal of Justice announced the verdicts and prison sentences but offered no other comment on the trial's outcome.

One of the men, Tomeu Vadell, had said in a letter written in a Caracas jail and provided exclusively to The Associated Press before the verdict that he hoped for a fair trial so he could walk free with his name cleared and go home to his family in the United States.

In a statement after the verdict, Vadell's family said: "We are sad to see that justice did not prevail today. But we are hopeful that the truth will set our loved one, Tomeu, free and home to us soon."

Despite his circumstances, Vadell had expressed hopefulness.

"During the trial, the truth has proven undeniable," Vadell said in the four-page hand-written letter. "It proves that I am innocent."

"I'm now reaching an intersection where if justice is done, I will be able to rebuild my life and try to compensate my family for all the lost moments," he added. "The light is intense -- the hope is great -- give me freedom."

It was the first time Vadell, or any of the so-called Citgo 6, had spoken publicly since being arrested and charged with in a purported big corruption scheme. He has been held at a feared Caracas jail called El Helicoide.

The others convicted are Gustavo Cárdenas, Jorge Toledo, brothers Jose Luis Zambrano and Alirio Zambrano, all now U.S. citizens. Jose Pereira, a permanent resident, received the longest sentence.

They were also charged with embezzlement stemming from a never-executed proposal to refinance some \$4 billion in Citgo bonds by offering a 50% stake in the company as collateral. Maduro at the time accused them of "treason."

They all pleaded innocence.

The men were summoned to the headquarters of PDVSA for what they were told was a budget meeting on Nov. 21, 2017. A corporate jet shuttled them to Caracas and they were told they would be home for Thanksgiving. Instead, military intelligence officers swarmed into the boardroom and hauled them off to jail.

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Their trial started four months ago and closing arguments took place Thursday. The judge immediately announced her verdict.

The proceeding played out one day a week in a downtown Caracas court. Due to the pandemic, sessions were held in front of a bank of dormant elevators in a hallway, apparently to take advantage of air flowing through open windows.

News media and rights groups were denied access to the hearings. There was no response to a letter addressed to Judge Lorena Cornielles seeking permission for AP to observe.

The office of Venezuela's chief prosecutor said prior to the verdict in a statement to AP that investigators found "serious evidence" that corroborated financial crimes potentially damaging to the state-run company.

"The Citgo case has developed normally during all the stages established by the Venezuelan criminal process," the statement said.

Loreto said his client appeared to have been caught up in a "geopolitical conflict" of which he was not a part. He said Vadell's name never appeared on any of the documents prosecutors read into evidence.

"There's nothing that refers to Tomeu in any way -- directly or indirectly," the lawyer said. "This is the story of a good guy being held against his will for all the wrong reasons."

Former New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson, who has negotiated the release of other Americans held by hostile governments, traveled to Caracas in July and met with Maduro.

He didn't win their freedom, but days later two of them — Cárdenas and Toledo — were freed from jail and put in house detention. Two weeks later, the long-delayed trial began.

Richardson told AP that conversations with the Venezuelan government continue despite his meeting with Maduro being "a little stormy." He said he believes there is an opening tied to President-elect Joe Biden and a desire by Maduro to improve relations with Washington.

"I think the Venezuelans have been straight with me, but more progress needs to be made," Richardson said before the verdict. "My hope is to have something positive by Christmas."

It is not clear what approach Biden will take toward Maduro. Trump aggressively pressed to remove Maduro through sweeping financial sanctions and the U.S. Justice Department has indicted Maduro as a "narcoterrorist," offering a \$15 million reward for his arrest.

Vadell's letter steered clear of politics. He didn't mention Maduro or speak about his jailers, though he did express concern about the "consequences of repercussions" of speaking out.

With encouragement from his family, Vadell broke his silence, taking a risk relatives said was necessary.

"I believe it's more important that the light of hope illuminates us," Vadell wrote. "May the light of hope put an end to the sadness of my family."

The five other men did not respond to invitations AP made through their lawyers to comment.

Vadell's daughter, Cristina Vadell, said in a phone interview from Lake Charles, Louisiana, that her father isn't the kind of person who seeks attention. Rather, he prefers to focus on work and his family.

During his 35-year career with PDVSA and Citgo, Vadell ended up running a refinery in Lake Charles and then became vice president of refining. The letter attempts to expose this side of his life, she said.

"I think he was willing to take some risks and open some hearts to allow him to come home," she said. "I think he's still wondering 'What happened?' He went to a work meeting and never came home."

Scott Smith on Twitter: @ScottSmithAP

Associated Press writer Joshua Goodman in Miami contributed to this report.

Trump says he'll leave if Electoral College seats Biden

By JILL COLVIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump said Thursday that he will leave the White House if the Electoral College formalizes President-Elect Joe Biden's victory — even as he insisted such a decision would be a "mistake" — as he spent his Thanksgiving renewing baseless claims that "massive fraud" and crooked

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officials in battleground states caused his election defeat.

"Certainly I will. But you know that," Trump said Thursday when asked whether he would vacate the building, allowing a peaceful transition of power in January. But Trump — taking questions for the first time since Election Day — insisted that "a lot of things" would happen between now and then that might alter the results.

"This has a long way to go," Trump said, even though he lost.

The fact that a sitting American president even had to address whether or not he would leave office after losing reelection underscores the extent to which Trump has smashed one convention after another over the last three weeks. While there is no evidence of the kind of widespread fraud Trump has been alleging, he and his legal team have nonetheless been working to cast doubt on the integrity of the election and trying to overturn voters' will in an unprecedented breach of democratic norms.

Trump spoke to reporters in the White House's ornate Diplomatic Reception Room after holding a teleconference with U.S. military leaders stationed across the globe. He thanked them for their service and jokingly warned them not to eat too much turkey, then turned to the election after ending the call. He repeated grievances and angrily denounced officials in Georgia and Pennsylvania, two key swing states that helped give Biden the win.

Trump claimed, despite the results, that this may not be his last Thanksgiving at the White House. And he insisted there had been "massive fraud," even though state officials and international observers have said no evidence of that exists and Trump's campaign has repeatedly failed in court.

Trump's administration has already given the green light for a formal transition to get underway. But Trump took issue with Biden moving forward.

"I think it's not right that he's trying to pick a Cabinet," Trump said, even though officials from both teams are already working together to get Biden's team up to speed.

And as he refused to concede, Trump announced that he will be traveling to Georgia to rally supporters ahead of two Senate runoff elections that will determine which party controls the Senate. Trump said the rally for Republican Sens. David Perdue and Kelly Loeffler would likely be held Saturday. The White House later clarified he had meant Dec. 5.

One of the reasons Republicans have stood by Trump and his baseless claims of fraud has been to keep his loyal base energized ahead of those runoffs on Jan. 5. But Trump, in his remarks, openly questioned whether that election would be fair in a move that could dampen Republican turnout.

"I think you're dealing with a very fraudulent system. I'm very worried about that," he said. "People are very disappointed that we were robbed."

As for the Electoral College, Trump made clear that he will likely never formally concede, even if he said he would leave the White House.

"It's gonna be a very hard thing to concede. Because we know there was massive fraud," he said, noting that, "time isn't on our side."

"If they do," vote against him, Trump added, "they've made a mistake."

Asked whether he would attend Biden's inauguration, Trump said he knew the answer but didn't want to share it yet.

But there were some signs that Trump was coming to terms with his loss.

At one point he urged reporters not to allow Biden the credit for pending coronavirus vaccines. "Don't let him take credit for the vaccines because the vaccines were me and I pushed people harder than they've ever been pushed before," he said.

As for whether or not he plans to formally declare his candidacy to run again in 2024 — as he has discussed with aides — Trump said he didn't "want to talk about 2024 yet."

All states must certify their results before the Electoral College meets on Dec. 14, and any challenge to the results must be resolved by Dec. 8. States have already begun that process, including Michigan, where Trump and his allies tried and failed to delay the process, and Georgia and Pennsylvania.

Vote certification at the local and state level is typically a ministerial task that gets little notice, but that changed this year with Trump's refusal to concede and his unprecedented attempts to overturn the results

of the election through a fusillade of legal challenges and attempts to manipulate the certification process in battleground states he lost.

Biden won by wide margins in both the Electoral College and popular vote, where he received nearly 80 million votes, a record.

Venezuela judge convicts 6 American oil execs, orders prison

By SCOTT SMITH ASSOCIATED PRESS

CARACAS, Venezuela (AP) — Six American oil executives held for three years in Venezuela were found guilty of corruption charges by a judge Thursday and immediately sentenced to prison, dashing hopes of a quick release that would send them home to their families in the United States.

Some relatives had been bracing for the disheartening outcome, which came on the evening of Thanksgiving Day.

Alirio Rafael Zambrano, brother to two of the men, said they were “undeniably innocent” and victims of “judicial terrorism.” No evidence in the case supports a guilty conviction, he said.

“We, the family, are heartbroken to be separated even further from our loved ones,” Zambrano said in a phone message from New Jersey. “We pray that the leaders of our nation step forward and continue to fight unceasingly for their freedom and human rights.”

Attorney María Alejandra Poleo, who helped represent three of the men, said the case was “void of evidence.” “Of course, the defense will appeal the decision,” she said.

The so-called Citgo 6 are employees of Houston-based Citgo refining company, which is owned by Venezuela’s state oil company, PDVSA. They had been lured to Venezuela three years ago for a business meeting and were arrested on corruption charges.

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One of the men, Tomeu Vadell, has said in a letter written in a Caracas jail and provided exclusively to The Associated Press before the verdict that he had hopes for a fair trial so he could walk free with his name cleared and go home to his family in the United States.

Despite his circumstances, Vadell held out hope.

“During the trial, the truth has proven undeniable,” Vadell said in the four-page hand-written letter. “It proves that I am innocent.”

“I’m now reaching an intersection where if justice is done, I will be able to rebuild my life and try to compensate my family for all the lost moments,” he added. “The light is intense -- the hope is great -- give me freedom.”

Vadell said it was especially painful to be separated during the Thanksgiving season from his wife, three adult children and a newborn grandson he has never held.

“Before living this tragedy, these celebrations were very special times for our family,” Vadell wrote, saying he embraced the traditional American holiday after moving in 1999 from Caracas to Lake Charles, Louisiana, for a job with Citgo. “Now, they bring me a lot of sadness.”

It’s the first time Vadell, or any of the so-called Citgo 6, had spoken publicly since being arrested and charged with in a purported big corruption scheme. He has been held at a feared Caracas jail called El Helicoide.

The others convicted are Gustavo Cárdenas, Jorge Toledo, brothers Jose Luis Zambrano and Alirio Zambrano, all now U.S. citizens. Jose Pereira, a permanent resident, received the longest sentence.

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Associated Press writer Joshua Goodman in Miami contributed to this report.

Empty seats, delivered feasts as virus changes Thanksgiving

By REGINA GARCIA CANO, MATT SEDENSKY and HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press

Vivian Zayas can't keep herself from scrolling through photos of last Thanksgiving, when her mother stood at the stove to make a big pot of rice and beans and then took a seat at the edge of the table.

That was before anyone had heard of COVID-19 and before it claimed the retired seamstress. Ana Martinez died at 78 on April 1 while recovering at a nursing home from a knee replacement.

The family is having their traditional meal of turkey, yams, green beans and rice and beans — but Zayas is removing a seat from the table at her home in Deer Park, New York, and putting her mother's walker in its place.

"It's a painful Thanksgiving. You don't even know, should you celebrate?" asked Zayas. "It's a lonely time."

The family is left with "an empty chair at the table forever," another daughter, Alexa Rivera, said Thursday.

Americans are marking the Thanksgiving holiday amid an unrelenting pandemic that has claimed the lives of more than a quarter of a million people in the United States.

Turkey and pies will still come out of ovens, football will still be on TV, families will still give thanks and have lively conversations about politics. But this holiday has been utterly altered after months filled with sorrows and hardships: Many feasts are weighed down by the loss of loved ones; others have been canceled or scaled back with the virus surging.

Zoom and FaceTime calls have become a fixture at dinner tables to connect with family members who don't want to travel. Far fewer volunteers are helping at soup kitchens or community centers. A Utah health department has been delivering boxes of food to residents who are infected with the virus and can't go to the store. A New York nursing home is offering drive-up visits for families of residents struggling with celebrating the holiday alone.

"The holidays make it a little harder," said Harriet Krakowsky, an 85-year-old resident of the Hebrew Home at Riverdale in New York who misses the big Thanksgiving celebrations of years past and has lost neighbors and friends to the virus. "I cry, but I get over it. We have to go on."

On any normal Thanksgiving Day, Kara McKlemurry and her husband would drive from their Clearwater, Florida, home to one of two places: his family's home in another part of the state or her family's house in Alabama. This year, McKlemurry informed her family there would be no visits. When her in-laws offered to stop by, the couple said no.

She and her husband didn't want to risk infecting anyone or getting the virus themselves.

Not everyone followed McKlemurry's example. Millions of Americans bought tickets to fly somewhere for the holiday, crowding airports despite pleas from officials to avoid travel and gatherings.

Still, McKlemurry, 27, wanted to do something unique to mark this unusual holiday — something to let everyone know that she and her husband still feel blessed this year.

So, a week before Thanksgiving, armed with colored pens and stickers of owls with scarves, she hand wrote notes of gratitude to every member of the family.

"We're so grateful to have you in our lives," she wrote on a card with a cartoon fox, "even if we can't actually be together this year for the holidays."

In the nation's capital, the convention center is empty unlike in previous years, when volunteers have worked together to serve a meal to about 5,000 people. In the era of social distancing, the sponsored event had to be reimaged.

Ahead of the holiday, organizers delivered to 20 nonprofits 5,000 gift bags, each with winter clothing accessories, hand sanitizer and a mask, and 5,000 boxes that included a turkey sandwich with condiments, a side potato salad, a cookie and utensils.

From start to finish, Thanksgiving is different this year for Jessica Franz, a nurse who works the graveyard shift at Olathe Medical Center, in a Kansas City suburb.

For one, Franz, 39, is celebrating without her mother-in-law, Elaine Franz, who died of the coronavirus on

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Nov. 10, just one day before her 78th birthday. In previous years, her mother-in-law, who was Mennonite, would lay out a spread for her children and grandchildren. At Franz's work, in a typical year, co-workers would bring food for a potluck.

None of that is happening this year.

The family is shifting the festivities to Zoom and FaceTime. It's been hard for her daughters — ages, 2, 8 and 11. Her middle daughter was exposed to the coronavirus at school and is quarantined until Dec. 3, and her oldest daughter is struggling with the concept of a scaled-back holiday.

"We had a good conversation that was, 'This year may be different, and that's OK. It is one year. If things are different this year and that means we get to see all the rest of our family next year, it is OK,'" said Franz, who has personally cared for patients dying of coronavirus.

The Thanksgiving gathering at David Forsyth's home in Southern California, meanwhile, comes with a uniquely 2020 feel: rapid virus tests at the door to decide who gets inside.

The kit costs about \$1,000 for 20 tests, each of which involve pricking a finger and putting a drop of blood on a tray. Ten minutes later the results either show someone is negative, has antibodies or is positive.

Normally, about 15 to 20 people attend the family's Thanksgiving dinner in Channel Islands Harbor. But this year, it will only be eight of them: Forsyth, his wife, her four adult sons and the partners of two of them.

His wife started cooking Tuesday. She's planning a cold cucumber soup for a starter and bunch of appetizers for the early afternoon meal. The sons are bringing side dishes. Turkey and the fixings are the main course. Champagne may be cracked.

Forsyth hasn't seen his family much during the pandemic but wanted to save the holiday.

"People are trying to live a normal life," he said. "And, you know, with the second wave coming now, it's not a bad idea to be prepared."

Kerry Osaki longs to see his now-grown children, without masks, and hug them. But instead he and his wife are celebrating just the two of them after their traditions were upended.

Osaki's 93-year-old mother, Rose, who lived with the couple in Orange County in California, died from the virus after all three got sick.

With his mother gone, Osaki, 67, and his cousin decided to pass on the family's annual Thanksgiving get-together. His wife, Lena Adame, typically spent the holiday cooking a spread of turkey and stuffing with her relatives — but some had seen virus cases at their workplaces, so the couple decided to skip that, too.

"It's just been a long, rough and sometimes sad year," he said.

In Ogden, Utah, Evelyn Maysonet stepped out of her home Tuesday morning to find boxes overflowing with canned goods, desserts and a turkey. She has been isolating with her husband and son since all three tested positive for COVID-19.

None of them has been able to leave to buy groceries, so they were thrilled to receive the health department's delivery — and the chance to cherish the things that matter most.

"As long as you have a life and you're still alive, just make the best of it with you and your family," Maysonet said.

Associated Press journalists Tamara Lush, Jennifer Sinco Kelleher, Sophia Eppolito, Amy Taxin and John Minchillo contributed to this report.

Holiday trends to watch: Adult Play-Doh; stores that ship

By JOSEPH PISANI and ANNE D'INNOCENZIO AP Retail Writers

NEW YORK (AP) — The pandemic is turning this into a holiday shopping season like no other.

Toy companies are targeting stuck-at-home grown-ups with latte-smelling Play-Doh and Legos that turn into Warhols. Those who added a puppy to their family during the pandemic will see tons of gift options for their new furry friend. And with more people shopping online, stores are doing double duty as shipping centers to try to get gifts to doorsteps as fast as possible.

Here's what to expect:

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TOYS FOR ADULTS

Kids aren't the only ones who need some fun. Toy companies are targeting bored adults stuck at home during the pandemic. Need something to fidget during your next Zoom meeting? Hasbro has new moldable Play-Doh varieties that smell like stuff grown-ups would recognize: lattes, fresh cut grass and smoked meats.

Lego, meanwhile, wants adults to put on their headphones and "forget about the rest of the world" while turning the plastic pieces in their new kits into hangable art, like Andy Warhol's famous Marilyn Monroe portraits.

Marissa DiBartolo, editor in chief of toy review site The Toy Insider, says she's seen more coloring books and challenging puzzles being designed with adults in mind.

FROM YOUTUBE TO THE TOY STORE

The canines on "Paw Patrol" better watch their tails. YouTube stars with millions of viewers are heading to the toy aisle, a place where TV cartoon characters used to rule.

It's all because kids are spending so much time watching YouTube instead of cable TV, says DiBartolo. That's made stars of the video-streaming site just as recognizable as those on Nickelodeon.

Figurines of Blippi, a man who wears orange suspenders and hosts educational kid videos on YouTube, are being sold at Target and Amazon. At Walmart, toys featuring Ryan Kaji, a kid who reviews toys on his Ryan's World YouTube channel, have been hot sellers. Toy company VTech is playing into the trend in another way, selling a KidiZoom Creator camera that comes with a green screen so kids can add special effects and pretend to be YouTube influencers themselves.

And if you need another sign of just how big YouTube stars have become, a 42-foot-tall (13-meter-tall) balloon based on Kaji from Ryan's World appeared Thursday in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade, floating next to TV icons like SpongeBob and, yes, Chase from "Paw Patrol."

STORES AS SHIPPING HUBS

Retailers including Walmart and Best Buy that were already using their locations as hubs to ship e-commerce orders are now coming up with new strategies to get even faster. The moves come as they face a holiday crunch expected to tax shipping networks and likely result in delivery delays.

Walmart this week launched a special program for the holidays. It has some of its online orders being fulfilled directly from stores using delivery services like Postmates and DoorDash instead of carriers like FedEx or UPS. The aim is to ensure customers will be able to get their orders quickly, even on the same day.

Meanwhile, Best Buy says that 340 of its stores are being specially designated to handle a higher volume of online orders, though all its stores ship e-commerce packages. Its goal: to have the 340 stores ship more than 70% of its ship-from-store units during the holiday quarter.

And then there are many small-to-medium sized businesses increasingly turning to operators of micro-warehouses — mini-shipping hubs that are located in urban areas — to help pack and delivery goods. Ben Jones is the CEO and founder of Ohi, which operates five micro-warehouses for various brands like sparkling tonic Olipop, or provides software for third parties at 115 locations for e-commerce fulfillment across the U.S. He says he's seen more brands using his software because many aren't able to guarantee delivery by Christmas via standard shipping if items are ordered after the first week of December.

GIFTS FOR THE POOCH

More people adopted puppies and kittens during the pandemic, and stores are pouncing to cash in. Petco is selling matching pajamas for dogs and their humans with snow flakes and Christmas trees. And Chewy, the online pet store, is getting more personal, inscribing pets names into bandanas, bowls or beds.

Consulting firm Deloitte expects half of shoppers to spend some of their money on pet treats and other supplies this holiday season.

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FORGET ABOUT IMPULSE SHOPPING

It's not just frenzied crowds that will be absent this holiday season. So will impulse shopping — the practice of throwing in extra items like toys or bath balms as shoppers go in and out of the aisles.

Typically, 25% of holiday shopping is based on impulse, according to Marshal Cohen, chief industry advisor at NPD Group, a market research firm. This year, Cohen said he expects that figure to drop to about 10% as shoppers dramatically shift their buying online to avoid physical stores. And when they do go to stores, customers will be buying with a purpose, picking up things they need as they try to minimize exposure to COVID-19

"Impulse shopping is the icing on the cake," Cohen said. "It is the difference between a successful profitable holiday and a ho hum holiday." _____

This story has been updated to correct that Petco is offering matching pajamas for owners and dogs, not matching sweaters.

They're baaack: Trump and allies still refuse election loss

By COLLEEN LONG, ALANNA DURKIN RICHER and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Monday seemed like the end of President Donald Trump's relentless challenges to the election, after the federal government acknowledged President-elect Joe Biden was the "apparent winner" and Trump cleared the way for cooperation on a transition of power.

But his baseless claims have a way of coming back. And back. And back.

On Thursday, after a Thanksgiving evening conversation from the White House with troops stationed overseas, Trump abruptly pivoted to angrily alleging — still without any evidence — that "massive fraud" was behind his defeat.

Speaking to news crews gathered to watch the traditional holiday conversation with the military, Trump denounced officials in battleground states he'd lost as "communists" and "enemies of the state." Trump also announced he'd be traveling to Georgia to meet with what he said would be tens of thousands of supporters on Dec. 5, ahead of two runoffs there that will likely determine whether Republicans or Democrats control the Senate.

The 2020 presidential race is turning into the zombie election that Trump just won't let die. Despite dozens of legal and procedural setbacks, his campaign keeps filing new challenges that have little hope of succeeding and making fresh, unfounded claims of fraud.

But that's the point. Trump's strategy, his allies concede in private, wasn't to change the outcome, but to create a host of phantom claims about the 2020 presidential race that would infect the nation with doubt and keep his base loyal, even though the winner — Biden — was clear and there has been no evidence of mass voter fraud.

"Zombies are dead people walking among the living — this litigation is the same thing," said Franita Tolson, a professor at the University of Southern California Gould School of Law. "In terms of litigation that could change the election, all these cases are basically dead men walking."

It's a strategy tolerated by many Republicans, most notably Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, who are clinging to Trump as they face a test of retaining their own power in the form of two runoff elections in Georgia in January.

"This really is our version of a polite coup d'etat," said Thomas Mann, senior resident scholar at the Institute of Governmental Studies at the University of California at Berkeley. "It could end quickly if the Republican Party acknowledged what was going on. But they cower in the face of Trump's connection with the base."

A day after Trump said his administration should begin working with Biden's team, three more lawsuits were filed by allies attempting to stop the certification in two more battleground states. In Minnesota, a judge did not rule on the suit and the state certified the results for Biden. Another was filed in Wisconsin, which doesn't certify until Tuesday. Arizona Republicans filed a complaint over ballot inspection; the state certification is due Monday.

And the campaign legal team said state lawmakers in Arizona and Michigan would hold meetings on the election "to provide confidence that all of the legal votes have been counted and the illegal votes have

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not been counted in the November 3rd election.”

In Pennsylvania, where state Republican lawmakers met at Gettysburg on Wednesday to air grievances about the election, Trump lawyer Rudy Giuliani attended in person and Trump dialed in from the Oval Office.

“We have all the evidence,” Trump asserted. “All we need is to have some judge listen to it properly without having a political opinion.”

But the strongest legal rebuke yet came from a conservative Republican judge in federal court in Pennsylvania, who on Saturday dismissed the Trump team’s lawsuit seeking to throw out the results of the election. The judge admonished the Trump campaign in a scathing ruling about its lack of evidence. The campaign has appealed.

Trump’s allies have privately acknowledged their plan would never actually overturn the results, but rather might provide Trump an off-ramp for a loss he wasn’t owning up to and an avenue to keep his base loyal for whatever he does next.

“And then our governing and politics will be hellish, because he will continue doing what he’s doing from his private own perch,” Mann predicted.

Emily Murphy, the top official at the General Services Administration, declared Biden the “apparent winner” Monday, a procedural yet critical step that allowed for the transition to begin in earnest. She made the determination after Trump’s efforts to subvert the vote failed across battleground states. She cited “recent developments involving legal challenges and certifications of election results.”

Michigan certified Biden’s 154,000-count victory Monday, despite calls by Trump to the GOP members to block the vote to allow for an audit of ballots in Wayne County, where Trump claimed he was the victim of fraud. Biden crushed the president by more than 330,000 votes there.

“The board’s duty today is very clear,” said Aaron Van Langevelde, the Republican vice chair. “We have a duty to certify this election based on these returns.”

Still, the Trump legal team dismissed the certification as “simply a procedural step” and insisted it would fight on.

Trump and his allies have brought at least four cases in Michigan that sought — unsuccessfully — to block certification of election results in part or all of the state.

In Pennsylvania, after Gov. Tom Wolf certified Biden as the winner, an appeals court judge ordered state officials to halt any further steps toward certifying election results. The state has appealed to Pennsylvania’s Supreme Court.

In Arizona, just as lawyers for a woman in the Phoenix area dropped a case alleging that equipment was unable to record her ballot because she completed it with a county-issued Sharpie pen, Trump’s campaign filed its own lawsuit echoing some of the same complaints. As that suit was about to be dismissed, lawyers for the woman filed a new case reviving the claims and demanding that she be allowed to recast her ballot. All three of the cases have now been dismissed.

“The legal process seems to be unfolding the way it’s supposed to, but the Trump campaign has made clear its desire to throw wrenches in the system wherever it can,” said Lisa Marshall Manheim, a professor at the University of Washington School of Law.

Richer reported from Boston. Associated Press writers Maryclaire Dale in Philadelphia, Scott Bauer in Madison, Wisconsin; Jacques Billeaud in Phoenix and Steve Karnowski in St. Paul, Minnesota, contributed to this report.

Thanksgiving travelers try to reach destinations, miss virus

By DANIELLA PETERS Associated Press

Americans, millions of whom traveled against the advice of public health officials, tried to stay safe before they hunkered down with their families for Thanksgiving, a holiday remade by the pandemic as case numbers and death tolls rise.

Lily Roberts, 19, said she got tested for COVID-19 at San Francisco International Airport before driving home to Marin County in Northern California.

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"I'm not worried about it because I'm not at risk," Roberts said. "However, I do follow the rules and the precautions because of my parents. That's why I'm getting tested because I do not want to bring it into my home."

Thanksgiving travel traditionally comes with highs and lows but it's even more fraught this year as travelers attempt to social distance while navigating crowds.

Lexi Cusano, 23, said Wednesday she encountered people standing too close in airport terminals, some not wearing masks or wearing them improperly, on her way from Miami to Hartford, Connecticut.

"It was just a little bit overwhelming and very shocking to me that people were just — you couldn't move in a 6-foot radius without hitting someone or breathing in with a person next to you," she said. "It was just a little bit crazy."

She said travelers didn't act any safer on the plane.

"People were just hanging out without their masks on," said Cusano, who recently took a job in Miami. "I saw them walking back and forth from the bathroom, down the aisles, with no mask on, and I was like, this is a little bit ridiculous now."

"You know, the main fear people have usually going on planes is: 'Are we going to crash?'" she added. "But today, it was more like, 'I'm breathing in the same air that's been circulating in here and people are just being very irresponsible.' So that was the main horror."

Things appeared a bit cramped to Juan Mojuta who flew Wednesday night to Wilmington, North Carolina, from Arizona.

"The first flight was very claustrophobic," Mojuta told WWAY-TV. "A lot of people. Very gathered. But the second flight wasn't as bad."

More than 12.7 million Americans have been diagnosed with the virus since the pandemic's start earlier this year and deaths have topped 262,200, according to Johns Hopkins University.

Data shows the seven-day rolling average for daily new cases in the U.S. rose over the past two weeks from 127,487 on Nov. 11 to 175,809 on Thursday. The seven-day rolling average for daily new deaths rose from 1,044 to 1,658 over that time.

Millions of Americans took to the skies and the highways ahead of Thanksgiving, despite warning and pleas from elected and health officials in a number of states to stay home and keep holiday gatherings smaller than usual.

Cusano said she got tested at Bradley International Airport in Connecticut after landing and was told to expect results in two to three days.

Regardless of her test results, she said she plans to quarantine in Connecticut for a month or two to make sure that, if she is infected during the holidays, she won't infect anyone else. She works as a chief operating officer for a media company and can do the job remotely.

For most people, the new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough that clear up in two to three weeks. For some — especially older adults and people with existing health problems — it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia, and death.

Peters reported from Milwaukee. AP journalist Haven Daley contributed from San Francisco.

Paris police suspended over beating of Black man

By SYLVIE CORBET Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — A Black man beaten up by several French police officers said he is seeking justice after the publication of videos showing officers repeatedly punching him, using a truncheon and tear gas against him for no apparent reason.

French Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin ordered the officers involved in the case suspended.

The incident came as President Emmanuel Macron's government is pushing a new bill that restricts the ability to film police, which has prompted protests from civil liberties groups and journalists concerned that it would allow police brutality to go undiscovered and unpunished.

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Videos first published on Thursday by French news website Loopsider show the violent arrest of a music producer, Michel Zecler, in the 17th arrondissement or district of the French capital on Saturday.

The video images obtained by the Associated Press, both from a security camera inside the studio and filmed by neighbors outside, show three officers following Zecler inside his music studio, where they can be seen repeatedly punching him and beating him with a truncheon.

Zecler told the Associated Press he feels "good" now that "the truth is out."

"I want to understand why I have been assaulted by people who were wearing a police uniform. I want justice actually, because I believe in the justice of my country," he said.

Zecler said that the officers hurled repeated insults at him, including a very strong racist epithet.

He added that he still does not understand why officers decided to arrest him. He suffered injuries to his head, forearms and legs.

His lawyer, Hafida El Ali, said: "He asked them what they wanted, if they wanted to check his identity. ... They didn't stop beating him, the video of the violence (inside the studio) lasts for 12 minutes."

At some point the officers called in reinforcements and went outside. They then threw a tear gas grenade into the studio to get those inside to come out, according El Ali.

El Ali said that nine others who were recording music in the studio basement were also beaten.

"Outside they are still beaten up and thrown to the ground and that's the moment when a police officer sees they are being filmed," she said. Then the violence stops.

Zecler was taken into custody.

"I'm obviously scandalized by these images," Justice Minister Eric Dupond-Moretti said in a television interview. "There are racist police, lawyers or bakers, but to say the police are racist, it's not true."

Zecler's lawyer stressed the value of the videos in her client's case.

"These videos are essential because initially my client was being detained... for violence against people with public authority," El Ali said. "This is very serious. The reality is that if we didn't have these videos maybe my client would be in prison."

Darmanin tweeted that the body that investigates allegations of police misconduct, the Inspectorate General of the National Police, known by its French acronym IGPN, is looking into the case, saying, "I want disciplinary proceedings as soon as possible."

The Paris police prefecture said in a statement that IGPN will seek to establish the exact circumstances surrounding the man's arrest.

The Paris prosecutor's office is also investigating the police actions. The prosecutor's office said Thursday it has dropped the proceedings against Zecler opened the day of his arrest, and instead opened an investigation for "acts of violence by a person in position of public authority" and "false declaration."

According to Le Parisien newspaper, based on the written record of the officers' declarations the day after the arrest, Zecler drew their attention because he was not wearing a mask — which is mandatory in Paris outdoors amid the coronavirus pandemic. He seemed "nervous" and a "strong drug smell" was emanating from him. They said he was getting "dangerous" toward them.

Zecler's lawyer said: "My client never committed any violence against the police... He did not even defend himself."

It's the second such police brutality investigation in Paris this week prompted by video footage. The government ordered an internal police investigation on Tuesday after police officers were filmed tossing migrants out of tents and intentionally tripping one while evacuating a protest camp.

That same day, France's lower house of parliament approved a draft law meant to strengthen local police and provide greater protection to all officers. It notably makes it a crime to publish images of officers with intent to cause them harm. The bill, which enjoys public support after recent terrorist attacks, will now go to the Senate.

Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade takes flight in virus times

NEW YORK (AP) — The balloons were in the sky and the marching bands took to the streets for the

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annual Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade on Thursday, but coronavirus restrictions meant it was without the throngs of people usually scrambling for a view.

Instead of its typical path through Manhattan, this year's parade was kept to the area in front of Macy's flagship store and aimed at a television audience instead of live crowds.

There were some familiar balloon faces, of course, including Snoopy, Ronald McDonald, and SpongeBob SquarePants.

But the bigger balloons were missing the numerous handlers who would normally be walking underneath and holding the ropes. This year, they were attached to vehicles that kept them moving and decreased the number of people needed.

A number of entertainers performed, including Pentatonix, Keke Palmer and Sofia Carson, and a slew of Broadway shows were represented in taped performances from their casts.

Even with the pandemic protocols, the fact that the parade took place made it a rare festivity in a city that has seen most of its major events cancelled over the last year because of the virus.

The parade organizers recognized that reality, including representatives of some of the New York City parades that hadn't been able to happen — the St. Patrick's Day Parade, the Mermaid Parade, the Puerto Rican Day Parade and NYC Pride March.

High court blocks NY virus limits on houses of worship

By JESSICA GRESKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — With coronavirus cases surging again nationwide, the Supreme Court barred New York from enforcing certain limits on attendance at churches and synagogues in areas designated as hard hit by the virus.

The justices split 5-4 late Wednesday night, with new Justice Amy Coney Barrett in the majority. It was the conservative's first publicly discernible vote as a justice. The court's three liberal justices and Chief Justice John Roberts dissented.

The move was a shift for the court. Earlier this year, when Barrett's liberal predecessor, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, was still on the court, the justices divided 5-4 to leave in place pandemic-related capacity restrictions affecting churches in California and Nevada.

The court's action Wednesday could push New York to reevaluate its restrictions on houses of worship in areas designated virus hot spots. But the impact is also muted because the Catholic and Orthodox Jewish groups that sued to challenge the restrictions are no longer subject to them.

New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, a Democrat, said Thursday the ruling was "more illustrative of the Supreme Court than anything else" and "irrelevant from any practical impact" given that the restrictions have already been removed.

"Why rule on a case that is moot and come up with a different decision than you did several months ago on the same issue?" Cuomo asked in a conference call with reporters. "You have a different court. And I think that was the statement that the court was making."

The Diocese of Brooklyn and Agudath Israel of America have churches and synagogues in areas of Brooklyn and Queens previously designated red and orange zones. In those red and orange zones, the state had capped attendance at houses of worship at 10 and 25 people, respectively. But the those particular areas are now designated as yellow zones with less restrictive rules neither group challenged.

The justices acted on an emergency basis, temporarily barring New York from enforcing the restrictions against the groups while their lawsuits continue. In an unsigned opinion the court said the restrictions "single out houses of worship for especially harsh treatment."

"Members of this Court are not public health experts, and we should respect the judgment of those with special expertise and responsibility in this area. But even in a pandemic, the Constitution cannot be put away and forgotten. The restrictions at issue here, by effectively barring many from attending religious services, strike at the very heart of the First Amendment's guarantee of religious liberty," the opinion said.

The opinion noted that in red zones, while a synagogue or church cannot admit more than 10 people,

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businesses deemed "essential," from grocery stores to pet shops, can remain open without capacity limits. And in orange zones, while synagogues and churches are capped at 25 people, "even non-essential businesses may decide for themselves how many persons to admit."

Roberts, in dissent, wrote that there was "simply no need" for the court's action. "None of the houses of worship identified in the applications is now subject to any fixed numerical restrictions," he said, adding that New York's 10 and 25 person caps "do seem unduly restrictive."

"The Governor might reinstate the restrictions. But he also might not. And it is a significant matter to override determinations made by public health officials concerning what is necessary for public safety in the midst of a deadly pandemic," he wrote.

Roberts and four other justices wrote separately to explain their views. Barrett did not.

The court's action was a victory for the Roman Catholic Church and Orthodox Jewish synagogues that had sued to challenge state restrictions announced by Cuomo on Oct. 6.

The Diocese of Brooklyn, which covers Brooklyn and Queens, argued houses of worship were being unfairly singled out by the governor's executive order. The diocese argued it had previously operated safely by capping attendance at 25% of a building's capacity and taking other measures. Parts of Brooklyn and Queens are now in yellow zones where attendance at houses of worship is capped at 50% of a building's capacity, but the church is keeping attendance lower.

"We are extremely grateful that the Supreme Court has acted so swiftly and decisively to protect one of our most fundamental constitutional rights — the free exercise of religion," said Randy Mastro, an attorney for the diocese, in a statement.

Avi Schick, an attorney for Agudath Israel of America, wrote in an email: "This is an historic victory. This landmark decision will ensure that religious practices and religious institutions will be protected from government edicts that do not treat religion with the respect demanded by the Constitution."

Two lower courts had sided with New York in allowing the restrictions to remain in place. New York had argued that religious gatherings were being treated less restrictively than secular gatherings that carried the same infection risk, like concerts and theatrical performances.

There are currently several areas in New York designated orange zones but no red zones, according to a state website that tracks areas designated as hot spots.

Associated Press writer Deepti Hajela contributed to this report from New York.

Trump pardons Flynn despite guilty plea in Russia probe

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump pardoned his former national security adviser Michael Flynn on Wednesday, ending a yearslong prosecution in the Russia investigation that saw Flynn twice plead guilty to lying to the FBI and then reverse himself before the Justice Department stepped in to dismiss his case.

"It is my Great Honor to announce that General Michael T. Flynn has been granted a Full Pardon," Trump tweeted. "Congratulations to @GenFlynn and his wonderful family, I know you will now have a truly fantastic Thanksgiving!"

The pardon, in the waning weeks of Trump's single term, is part of a broader effort by Trump to undo the results of a Russia investigation that shadowed his administration and yielded criminal charges against a half-dozen associates. It comes just months after the president commuted the sentence of another associate, Roger Stone, days before he was to report to prison.

A Justice Department official said the department was not consulted on the pardon and learned Wednesday of the plan. But the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations, noted that the president has the legal power to pardon Flynn.

The move is likely to energize supporters who have taken up Flynn as a cause celebre and rallied around the retired Army lieutenant general as the victim of what they assert is an unfair prosecution, even though

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Flynn twice admitted guilt. Trump has repeatedly spoken warmly about Flynn and, in an indication of his personal interest in his fate, asked then-FBI Director James Comey in February 2017 to end a criminal investigation into the national security adviser.

In a statement, Flynn's family thanked Trump "for answering our prayers and the prayers of a nation" by issuing the pardon.

Democrats lambasted the pardon as undeserved and unprincipled. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi called it "an act of grave corruption and a brazen abuse of power," while Rep. Adam Schiff, the Democratic chair of the House Intelligence Committee, said a "pardon by Trump does not erase" the truth of Flynn's guilty plea, "no matter how Trump and his allies try to suggest otherwise."

"The President's enablers have constructed an elaborate narrative in which Trump and Flynn are victims and the Constitution is subject to the whims of the president," House Judiciary Committee Chair Jerry Nadler said in a statement. "Americans soundly rejected this nonsense when they voted out President Trump."

The pardon is the final step in a case defined by twists and turns. The most dramatic came in May when the Justice Department abruptly moved to dismiss the case, insisting that Flynn should not have been interviewed by the FBI in the first place, only to have U.S. District Judge Emmet Sullivan resist the request and appoint a former judge to argue against the federal government's position and to evaluate whether Flynn should be held in criminal contempt for perjury.

That former judge, John Gleeson, called the Justice Department's dismissal request an abuse of power and said its grounds for dropping the case were ever-evolving and "patently pretextual."

As Sullivan declined to immediately dismiss the prosecution, Flynn lawyer Sidney Powell sought to bypass the judge by asking a federal appeals court to direct him to drop the matter. A three-judge panel did exactly that, but the full court overturned that decision and sent the case back to Sullivan.

At a hearing in September, Powell told Sullivan that she had discussed Flynn's case with Trump but also said she did not want a pardon — presumably because she wanted him to be vindicated in the courts.

Powell emerged separately in recent weeks as a public face of Trump's efforts to overturn the results of his election loss to President-elect Joe Biden, but the Trump legal team distanced itself from her after she advanced a series of uncorroborated conspiracy claims.

The pardon spares Flynn the possibility of any prison sentence, which Sullivan could potentially have imposed had he ultimately rejected the Justice Department's dismissal request. That request was made after a review of the case by a federal prosecutor from St. Louis who had been specially appointed by Attorney General William Barr.

At issue in the prosecution was an FBI interview of Flynn, days after Trump's inauguration, about a conversation he had during the presidential transition period with the then-Russian ambassador.

Flynn acknowledged lying during that interview by saying he had not discussed with the diplomat, Sergey Kislyak, sanctions that the outgoing Obama administration had just been imposed on Russia for election interference. During that conversation, Flynn advised that Russia be "even-keeled" in response to the punitive measures, and assured him "we can have a better conversation" about relations between the countries after Trump became president.

The conversation alarmed the FBI, which at the time was investigating whether the Trump campaign and Russia had coordinated to sway the election. In addition, White House officials were stating publicly that Flynn and Kislyak had not discussed sanctions, which the FBI knew was untrue.

Flynn was ousted from his position in February 2017 after news broke that Obama administration officials had warned the White House that Flynn had indeed discussed sanctions with Kislyak and was vulnerable to blackmail. He pleaded guilty months later to a false statement charge.

But last May, after years of defending the prosecution, the Justice Department abruptly reversed its position.

It asserted the FBI had no basis to interview Flynn about Kislyak and that any statements he made during the interview were not material to the FBI's broader counterintelligence probe. The department also pointed to internal FBI notes showing agents had planned to close out the investigation weeks before

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interviewing Flynn about Kislyak.

Flynn, of Middletown, Rhode Island, was among the first people charged in Mueller's investigation and provided such extensive cooperation that prosecutors did not recommend any prison time, leaving open the possibility of probation.

But the morning he was to have been sentenced, after a stern rebuke about his behavior from Sullivan, Flynn asked for the hearing to be cut short so that he could continue cooperating and earn credit toward a more lenient sentence.

After that, he hired new attorneys — including Powell, a conservative commentator and outspoken critic of Mueller's investigation — who took a far more confrontational stance to the government and tried to withdraw his guilty plea.

Americans risk traveling over Thanksgiving despite warnings

By LISA MARIE PANE, SOPHIA TULP and DANIELLA PETERS Associated Press

Millions of Americans took to the skies and the highways ahead of Thanksgiving at the risk of pouring gasoline on the coronavirus fire, disregarding increasingly dire warnings that they stay home and limit their holiday gatherings to members of their own household.

Those who are flying witnessed a distinctly 2020 landscape at the nation's airports: plexiglass barriers in front of the ID stations, rapid virus testing sites inside terminals, masks in check-in areas and on board planes, and paperwork asking passengers to quarantine on arrival at their destination.

While the number of Americans traveling by air over the past several days was down dramatically from the same time last year, many pressed ahead with their holiday plans amid skyrocketing deaths, hospitalizations and confirmed infections across the U.S.

Some were tired of more than eight months of social distancing and determined to spend time with loved ones.

"I think with the holidays and everything, it's so important right now, especially because people are so bummed out because of the whole pandemic," said 25-year-old Cassidy Zerkle of Phoenix, who flew to Kansas City, Missouri, to visit family during what is traditionally one of the busiest travel periods of the year.

She brought snacks and her own hand sanitizer and said the flight was half full. She had a row of seats to herself.

"As long as you're maintaining your distance, you're not touching stuff and you're sanitizing your hands, people should see their families right now," she said.

The U.S. has recorded more than 12.7 million coronavirus infections and over 262,000 deaths. The country is still missing about eight infections for every one counted, according to a new government report Wednesday. Many people don't get tests, especially if they don't have symptoms.

More than 88,000 people in the U.S. — an all-time high — were in the hospital with COVID-19 as of Tuesday, pushing the health care system in many places to the breaking point, and new cases of the virus have been setting records, soaring to an average of over 174,000 per day.

Deaths have surged to more than 1,600 per day, a mark last seen in May, when the crisis in the New York area was easing.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and state and local authorities have begged people not to travel and urged them to keep their Thanksgiving celebrations small.

"That'll make sure that your extended family are around to celebrate Christmas and to celebrate the holidays next year," Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear said.

But even Denver Mayor Michael Hancock flew to Mississippi to spend Thanksgiving with his wife and youngest daughter despite sending messages on social media and to city staff asking them to avoid traveling for the holiday. He apologized, acknowledging that he went against his own public guidance.

"I made my decision as a husband and father, and for those who are angry and disappointed, I humbly ask you to forgive decisions that are borne of my heart and not my head," Hancock said.

About 900,000 to 1 million people per day passed through U.S. airport checkpoints from Friday through

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Wednesday, a drop-off of around 60% from the same time a year ago. Still, those were some of the biggest crowds since the COVID-19 crisis took hold in the U.S. in March. On Wednesday, the more than 1 million people screened at airports was the largest since the start of the pandemic.

Last year, a record 26 million passengers and crew passed through U.S. airport screening in the 11-day period around Thanksgiving.

More Americans drive than fly during the holiday, and AAA has projected those numbers are also likely to be lower this year. How much lower the auto club has not said.

Many states and cities have adopted precautions. Travelers to Los Angeles, either by plane or train, were required to fill out an online form acknowledging California's request that people quarantine for two weeks after arrival in the state.

Thea Zunick, 40, boarded a flight from Newark, New Jersey, to Florida to see her 90-year-old grandmother and her parents.

"We've all kind of decided like it's worth the risk," Zunick said. "But I wanted to make sure that all the efforts that I've made to stay healthy isn't undone by other people's carelessness. And absolutely, I know that I'm taking a risk by flying. I know that, but sometimes it's necessary."

She isolated at home for days before the trip, got a COVID-19 test that came back negative and made sure to choose an early and direct flight. She also masked up and layered a face shield on top.

"I felt like an astronaut, to be honest," Zunick said.

Once at the airport, Zunick said, she saw poor adherence to mask-wearing, loose enforcement of rules, long lines to check baggage and a disregard for social distancing in security lines.

Once she boarded her completely full flight, with middle seats occupied, she watched passengers eat and drink with their masks pulled down and sat next to a passenger wearing a loose bandanna, prompting her to call over a flight attendant, she said.

"I said to the stewardess, 'Hey, the person next to me, is that permitted? Because it's making me uncomfortable.' They're like, 'Oh, yeah, that's fine.' But it's not," Zunick said. "The bottom of it was open. And it was tied so loosely that it kept falling down throughout the flight and he kept messing with it and trying to make it tighter and pull it up."

Anne Moore, a 60-year-old woman from Chicago, flew to Albany, New York, to be with her daughter for the holiday and then drive back to Illinois with her. Her daughter is a senior at Dartmouth College, and Moore and her husband were worried about her driving back by herself.

Before the spike, the family had planned to hold a Thanksgiving gathering of fewer than 10 people. But instead it will be just Moore, her husband and her daughter.

"I have friends who are alone. And I'm not inviting them. And I feel badly about that," she said. "We'll take a walk or something instead. But yeah, the three of us are isolating."

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, Nov. 27, the 332nd day of 2020. There are 34 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Nov. 27, 1924, Macy's first Thanksgiving Day parade — billed as a "Christmas Parade" — took place in New York.

On this date:

In 1701, astronomer Anders Celsius, inventor of the Celsius temperature scale, was born in Uppsala, Sweden.

In 1910, New York's Pennsylvania Station officially opened.

In 1942, during World War II, the Vichy French navy scuttled its ships and submarines in Toulon (too-LOHN') to keep them out of the hands of German troops.

In 1953, playwright Eugene O'Neill died in Boston at age 65.

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In 1962, the first Boeing 727 was rolled out at the company's Renton Plant.

In 1970, Pope Paul VI, visiting the Philippines, was slightly wounded at the Manila airport by a dagger-wielding Bolivian painter disguised as a priest.

In 1973, the Senate voted 92-3 to confirm Gerald R. Ford as vice president, succeeding Spiro T. Agnew, who'd resigned.

In 1978, San Francisco Mayor George Moscone (mah-SKOH'-nee) and City Supervisor Harvey Milk, a gay-rights activist, were shot to death inside City Hall by former supervisor Dan White. (White served five years for manslaughter; he committed suicide in Oct. 1985.)

In 1998, answering 81 questions put to him three weeks earlier; President Clinton wrote the House Judiciary Committee that his testimony in the Monica Lewinsky affair was "not false and misleading."

In 1989, a bomb blamed on drug traffickers destroyed a Colombian Avianca Boeing 727, killing all 107 people on board and three people on the ground.

In 1999, Northern Ireland's biggest party, the Ulster Unionists, cleared the way for the speedy formation of an unprecedented Protestant-Catholic administration.

In 2000, a day after George W. Bush was certified the winner of Florida's presidential vote, Al Gore laid out his case for letting the courts settle the nation's long-count election.

Ten years ago: The State Department released a letter from its top lawyer to WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, warning that an expected imminent release of classified cables would put "countless" lives at risk, threaten global counterterrorism operations and jeopardize U.S. relations with its allies.

Five years ago: A gunman attacked a Planned Parenthood clinic in Colorado Springs, Colorado, killing three people and injuring nine. (Suspect Robert Dear was sent to a psychiatric hospital after being deemed incompetent for trial.) A subdued France paid homage to those killed in the Paris attacks two weeks earlier, honoring each of the 130 victims by name as President Francois Hollande pledged to "destroy the army of fanatics" who had claimed so many young lives.

One year ago: Two explosions, 13 hours apart, at a chemical plant in East Texas blew out windows and doors of nearby homes and prompted an evacuation order for more than 50,000 people; three plant workers sustained minor injuries.

Today's Birthdays: Footwear designer Manolo Blahnik is 78. Academy Award-winning director Kathryn Bigelow is 69. TV host Bill Nye ("Bill Nye, the Science Guy") is 65. Actor William Fichtner (FIHK'-nuhr) is 64. Caroline Kennedy is 63. Academy Award-winning screenwriter Callie Khouri is 63. Rock musician Charlie Burchill (Simple Minds) is 61. Actor Michael Rispoli is 60. Jazz composer/big band leader Maria Schneider is 60. Former Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty is 60. Rock musician Charlie Benante (Anthrax) is 58. Rock musician Mike Bordin (Faith No More) is 58. Actor Fisher Stevens is 57. Actor Robin Givens is 56. Actor Michael Vartan is 52. Actor Elizabeth Marvel is 51. Rapper Skoob (DAS EFX) is 50. Actor Kirk Acevedo is 49. Rapper Twista is 48. Actor Jaleel White is 44. Actor Arjay Smith is 37. Actor Alison Pill is 35. Actor Lashana Lynch (TV: "Still Star-Crossed") is 33.