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Groton Wells Fargo Branch to close

Customers who have used the Groton Branch of Wells Fargo received a letter this week indicating that the branch is set to permanently close.

The letter states that the bank will close at noon on March 24, 2021.



OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

December Groton Area Students of the Month



Samantha Pappas
Senior



Shae Jendel
Freshman



Jaedyn Penning
Seventh Grade



Kennedy Anderson
Junior



Faith Traphagen
Eighth Grade



Liby Althoff
Sixth Grade



Jackson Dinger
Sophomore

Blue Lights Being Added to Snowplow Fleet

PIERRE, S.D. – The South Dakota Department of Transportation is improving safety for motorists and snowplow drivers by adding flashing blue lights to the snowplow fleet across the state.

The pilot program will include 25 trucks equipped with the flashing blue lights spread out across the state.

“Snowplow drivers provide an essential service to our communities,” says Interim Transportation Secretary Joel Jundt. “The blue lights will add more visibility to our snowplow fleet to ensure they can continue to clear roads and keep drivers safe.”

Studies have shown people have become desensitized to the flashing amber lights. The blue lights have greater visibility in certain situations and because they have a higher frequency and shorter wavelength of light, they appear to be moving closer rather than farther away giving drivers a chance to react more quickly.

The most common crash statistic for snowplows is being hit from behind. Snowplows, when the blades are down, are travelling at 25 mph or less. Motorists are asked to slow down and stay eight car lengths behind the plow and to never pass one in a snow cloud. Remember, the snowplow driver is clearing the road ahead, so the safest place is behind the plow.

When a snowplow is involved in a crash that disables the snowplow, the plow and the driver are removed from service and the road he was working on is no longer getting cleared for possibly several more hours.

“Keeping drivers, workers, and emergency personnel safe is the department’s number one priority,” says Jundt. “We appreciate Gov. Kristi Noem and the state’s Legislature for working with us and adding new safety provisions to strengthen the current law and keep us on the road.”

Remember to check <https://sd511.org>, download the SDDOT 511 app, or call 5-1-1 before travelling, buckle up, have your winter emergency kit, and stay where you are if we are advising no travel.

The mission of the South Dakota Department of Transportation is to efficiently provide a safe and effective public transportation system. Read more about the innovative work of the SDDOT at <https://dot.sd.gov>.



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#304 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

New case numbers are staying well off the peaks we've seen in recent days. We can be grateful for that, but they're still ridiculously high, a real worry going into the holiday travel season with lots of travel anticipated. And we expect reporting to be wonky in the extreme now until after the first of the year. Some states are not planning to report at all on certain days over the next week and a half, and others expect slowdowns in both testing and reporting. I'm going to continue to report whatever we have each day, but I don't expect meaningful interpretations of numbers will be possible between now and January 4 or so when we get all caught up after the holidays. That should be just in time to establish a something of a baseline before the Christmas surge hits.

For today, we had 219,500 new cases reported. Our total cases are at 18,486,500, which is 1.2% over yesterday's total. I'm guessing we'll be at 20 million by the time we pick up solid reporting again in January, which is really depressing. Hospitalizations are at record levels again today; after three days of declines, we're again setting records. And deaths are clearly rising; this is the surge in deaths we predicted after Thanksgiving. There were 3311 deaths reported today, and we are now at 326,150, which is 1.0% above yesterday's total. Our six worst days for deaths are the past six days. This is not where we want to be while anticipating increased spread over the next couple of weeks.

I'm seeing real trouble in Tennessee over the past few days—lots of new cases per capita. California is in deep trouble; it is responsible for a fifth of the increases we've been seeing lately. Transmission seems to have shifted to the South with Oklahoma, Arizona, and Alabama rounding out the top five states.

I've confined myself, for the most part, in these Updates to reporting on the pandemic in the US, not because I think the rest of the world isn't important, but because there's enough to keep up with here. I do want to note tonight, however, that there is now no continent on the globe untouched by Covid-19 with the announcement that 36 members of Chile's permanent research station on Antarctica have tested positive. This is clearly worrisome on that continent because members of research teams live in very close quarters and medical supplies are limited—not like there's a major medical center just waiting for critical patients. Apparently the members of the Chilean team have not been in contact with those of other teams on the continent, so perhaps the outbreak can be limited to just that one station. Given, however, our repeated failure to limit spread in the rest of the world, I guess we'll have to see how this plays out. I'm not sure what other teams are doing to protect themselves, but the National Science Foundation has stated its commitment "to not exchanging personnel or accepting tourists" at the US Antarctic Program station, I imagine for the duration.

We have a sort of weird problem in the US—doses of these new-fangled monoclonal antibody treatments going begging. You will recall that monoclonal antibodies are those lab-made, highly purified versions of the antibodies we make ourselves in response to this virus. They have shown efficacy in shortening the duration of infections and were approved by the FDA under an emergency use authorization (EUA) in November. Supplies were very limited, so we knew from the start that not everyone who might benefit from these treatments would be able to access them. But instead of a rush on the supply, only about 20% of it has been used, and lots of folks who might benefit have not received it. There is a number of factors playing into this. One is that, with the overwhelming demand on resources at the moment, people who might benefit are not being identified expeditiously—and these medications have to be given within 10 days of first symptoms in order to be effective. With testing delays and lack of coordination, this just isn't happening. Also, patients have not been asking for them, partly because folks aren't eager to visit the perceived hotbeds of infection that are hospitals these days and partly because the high-profile administration of the antibodies to well-connected people has caused ordinary patients to think they're not available to regular folks. Health officials are encouraging patients to seek these treatments out. I would not have predicted this.

Another curious thing is that homeless people have not suffered the devastating waves of Covid-19 through their communities as expected. Early in the pandemic, this was a real fear—that these underserved members of our population would be getting sick and dying in high numbers. While there have been serious

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outbreaks at shelters here and there, the homeless population appears to be protected by the very dire conditions of their lives—by isolation, by living outdoors where the virus doesn't spread as efficiently, and by steps taken in cities with large homeless populations to provide hotel rooms. That's one bright spot.

We have more commentary on that new viral variant in Britain. The scientists on the UK's New and Emerging Respiratory Virus Threats Advisory Group (NERVTAG – who says the US has a corner on ridiculous acronyms?) say they are "highly confident" the variant is more infectious than the current variants; they believe it binds more tightly to the ACE2 receptor, which you will recall is the binding and entry site for this virus on host cells. Their thinking is that this tighter binding will facilitate viral entry into those host cells, and they also speculate that this different binding propensity may make children more susceptible to the virus than they have been to the earlier variants. The CDC, on the other hand, while agreeing that some research indicates this change in binding tendency, says, "it is unknown whether that tighter binding, if true, translates into any significant epidemiological or clinical differences." All of which is the long way to say we're still not sure what's going on with this variant. I'll update as the confusion grows or clears up, whichever comes first.

With a report of another possible genetic variant of the coronavirus spotted in England, this one possibly originating in South Africa, we see once again the pitiful state of genomic surveillance in the US. Many countries have a coordinated system in place to sample positive specimens from cases across the countries in order to sequence the viral genome and check out what sorts of mutations are turning up; but federal coordination of any sort of response to the pandemic has simply been beyond us from the start. Surveillance enables early identification of new variants like the now two that have turned up in Britain and the tracing of large outbreaks to a source. With the highest number of cases and deaths in the world, the US comes in 43rd in the world for this sort of work; we are sampling and sequencing very few genomes, and most of the work that is being done is privately conducted, so fairly limited by funding sources, not federally funded. So these variants popping up in Britain and in South Africa may well be in the US already, but we have no way of knowing in the current state of affairs. We really need to go to work on these things now that we have ample evidence that magical thinking isn't going to get the job done.

A glimmer of hope on the horizon: The AstraZeneca/University of Oxford vaccine candidate is nearing approval in the UK. This candidate need not be stored frozen; it can be held at refrigerator temperatures, which makes the logistics of vaccination programs a whole lot easier. This candidate is also considerably cheaper than the mRNA vaccines already approved. Due to some issues with trial design and data reporting, I do not expect this one to be ready for an application in the US for some time yet; but it should be ready to be deployed in many countries with less transportation infrastructure. This is a good thing, given that we're not going to really control this virus anywhere until we control it everywhere.

Here's a new kind of superspreader event: going to work sick. It happened in a town in Oregon where a single case in a workplace has been linked to two outbreaks with over 300 people going into quarantine because of exposure and, so far, seven deaths. And here's another: getting on an airplane sick. Now you know I'm not that hot on the idea of you getting on an airplane anyhow; and here's one reason why: You have no way to know there's not virus stowed away in a fellow passenger who lies about symptoms and gets on the plane. Here, it was a 60-year-old man who boarded a plane to Los Angeles in Orlando with his wife who, later when he became very ill on the plane, said he'd been having symptoms including trouble breathing and loss of taste and smell. Yes, you're asked to complete a checklist to report such symptoms; but if you don't tell the truth on that form, it's quite likely you're going to be able to board, as he did. After he collapsed on the flight, three passengers came to his aid, doing chest compressions for 45 minutes while the flight diverted. He died before the plane landed in New Orleans where it had been diverted, having exposed a planeload of people, but most especially the three passengers who helped him. At least one of those three people has developed symptoms. The airline and health authorities are now trying to reach all of those passengers to notify them of their risk.

A new study from Harvard Medical School and Massachusetts General Hospital and published in JAMA Network Open this week concludes pregnant women are not likely to transmit Covid-19 to their fetuses through the placenta. This was a small study of just 127 women, 64 of whom tested positive, and the

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findings were that none of the infants of the infected mothers tested positive. No evidence was found of virus in maternal blood or in the placenta. They also found that the women who had antibodies to the coronavirus in their bloodstream did not show expected levels of antibody in umbilical cord blood, which indicates these antibodies are not being transferred to the fetuses either. These findings will need confirmation from further research, but they are an indication that the risk of maternal-fetal transmission is not high.

We have a new paper published yesterday in the journal *Physics of Fluids*. A research team from the Consortium for Particulate Suspensions at New Mexico State University tested various kinds of masks in an experimental set-up for their protective qualities and concluded that masks, by themselves, that is, without social distancing, may be insufficient to control spread of the coronavirus. The researchers said in their paper, "This study, which can be treated as precautionary, provides quantitative support to the guidelines proposed by the medical research community that wearing a mask and avoiding close face-to-face or frontal interactions as much as possible will help in preventing the transmission and spreading of virus particles such as Covid-19 through sneezes and coughs."

One of the authors told CNN, "A mask definitely helps, but if the people are very close to each other, there is still a chance of spreading or contracting the virus. It's not just masks that will help. It's both the masks and distancing." So you can't just put on a mask and swan through life, ignoring all the other precautions; that, by itself, is not going to do the job. So if we needed further evidence that masks work, here it is; if you were thinking they are sufficient all by themselves, here's the evidence you're wrong. You must still maintain distance, limit indoor time with those not of your household, stay out of crowds, seek out places with good ventilation—all the things we already know we're supposed to do.

I heard a story this week from a friend about a little girl whose mom explained that Santa might not make it to their house this year. Due to the pandemic, money is tight at their house, and there simply wasn't anything left over for toys and gifts. Unfortunately, the child read this to mean she had been too naughty, and it was her fault Santa wouldn't be stopping by tomorrow night. You know, every child does some naughty things, including those their parents haven't discovered yet, so it's pretty easy to see how a kid might reach this conclusion upon hearing Santa was giving their house a miss.

Fortunately, this mother knew of a Facebook group in the community whose purpose was to connect people with excess items they no longer wanted to others in need of those items. The rules of the group are clear that no transactions, no exchanges, no payments of any kind are to take place, only gifts freely given from those who have to those who have not. People often log in to the group to list an item they're wanting to give away, but others can also log in to mention items they need.

So Mom logged in, explained her dilemma, and asked whether anyone had old toys their children no longer played with, mentioning her daughter's favorite themes in toys were unicorns and Frozen and giving her clothing size. Now I don't know what all was given, although there were more than 40 comments on the post offering, variously, a unicorn tent, a rag doll, a slime kit, a Frozen blanket, craft items and a coloring book, and a jewelry box. Someone smart offered wrapping paper too; I'm guessing, if there's no money for gifts, there's no money for wrapping paper either. I am also aware of a unicorn rocking horse which might have made its way from the local Target to Santa's pack too. Suffice it to say this little girl will no longer have to wonder whether she was too naughty for Santa to come; in fact, it looks very much like Santa will stagger up to this kid's house so loaded down he may need to bring an elf to help with the hauling.

The mom said, "I love it. I am so humbled and grateful I could cry inside of joy and happiness. Thank you to all the wonderful people who were able to help and to those I wasn't able to meet who wanted to help. The thought alone humbled me. Merry Christmas my fellow neighbors." In the face of all the online ugliness we see, I wanted you to know that the Internet is also capable of great love, just in time for one little girl.

I'm going to be giving myself a few days off over Christmas. I'll update the numbers each day and mention any significant news, but you can expect abbreviated reports while I take a breather. I wish all of you a lovely and rewarding holiday, whichever holiday you celebrate.

Please stay home, stay safe, and keep others safe too. We'll talk again.

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December 23rd COVID-19 UPDATE

Groton Daily Independent from State Health Lab Reports

South Dakota: Community Spread for week of Dec. 21:

Substantial: Stanley upgraded from Moderate to Substantial.

Moderate: Bennett, Buffalo, Faulk, Hanson, Mellette, Miner, Potter, Sanborn all downgraded from substantial to moderate.

Minimal: Harding, Sully downgraded from moderate to minimal.

None: Jones downgraded from minimal to none.

Positive: +531 (96,040 total) Positivity Rate: 8.0%

Total Tests: 6608 (732,239 total)

Hospitalized: +31 (5492 total). 337 currently hospitalized (-4)

Avera St. Luke's: 10 (+1) COVID-19 Occupied beds, 2 (0) COVID-19 ICU Beds, 1 (0) COVID-19 ventilators.

Sanford Aberdeen: 6 (-6) COVID-19 Occupied beds, 0 (-1) COVID-19 ICU Beds, 0 (-1) COVID-19 ventilators.

Deaths: +8 (1389 total)

Females: 2, Males: 6

60s=1, 70s=1, 80+=6

Counties: Bon Homme-1, Brown-1, Grant-1, Haakon-1, Harding - first death, Lincoln-1, Pennington-1,

Tripp-1.

Recovered: +836 (87,337 total)

Active Cases: -313 (7314)

Percent Recovered: 90.9%

Beadle (34) +6 positive, +5 recovered (93 active cases)

Brookings (28) +10 positive, +76 recovered (153 active cases)

Brown (54): +18 positive, +32 recovered (258 active cases)

Clark (2): +0 positive, +2 recovered (17 active cases)

Clay (11): +4 positive, +6 recovered (111 active cases)

Codington (68): +21 positive, +35 recovered (380 active cases)

Davison (52): +6 positive, +13 recovered (119 active cases)

Day (19): +2 positive, +8 recovered (48 active cases)

Edmunds (4): +4 positive, +7 recovered (40 active cases)

Faulk (10): +3 positive, +1 recovered (17 active cases)

Grant (22): +1 positive, +15 recovered (63 active cases)

Hanson (3): +1 positive, +2 recovered (17 active cases)

Hughes (25): +6 positive, +13 recovered (144 active cases)

Lawrence (27): +9 positive, +12 recovered (182

active cases)

Lincoln (61): +46 positive, +71 recovered (565 active cases)

Marshall (4): +2 positive, +2 recovered (29 active cases)

McCook (21): +3 positive, +4 recovered (39 active cases)

McPherson (1): +1 positive, +0 recovery (15 active case)

Minnehaha (251): +109 positive, +202 recovered (1810 active cases)

Pennington (124): +115 positive, +80 recovered (1031 active cases)

Potter (2): +1 positive, +0 recovered (10 active cases)

Roberts (26): +15 positive, +15 recovered (107 active cases)

Spink (22): +2 positive, +13 recovered (66 active cases)

Walworth (14): +4 positive, +11 recovered (53 active cases)

NORTH DAKOTA

COVID-19 Daily Report, Dec. 23:

- 5.5% rolling 14-day positivity
- 279 new positives
- 3,301 susceptible test encounters
- 118 currently hospitalized (-17)
- 2,389 active cases (-50)
- 1,243 total deaths (+5)

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County	Positive Cases	Recovered Cases	Negative Persons	Deceased Among Cases	Community Spread	% RT-PCR Test Positivity Rate (Weekly)
▲						
Aurora	404	374	760	8	Substantial	27.59%
Beadle	2467	2340	5082	34	Substantial	7.63%
Bennett	351	324	1077	8	Moderate	8.22%
Bon Homme	1456	1390	1858	23	Substantial	13.89%
Brookings	2858	2625	9765	28	Substantial	7.36%
Brown	4263	3951	10925	54	Substantial	19.47%
Brule	625	598	1671	6	Substantial	19.35%
Buffalo	406	390	849	10	Moderate	13.33%
Butte	843	772	2802	16	Substantial	15.91%
Campbell	111	105	203	3	Minimal	15.38%
Charles Mix	1076	995	3511	10	Substantial	14.81%
Clark	301	282	840	2	Substantial	5.26%
Clay	1582	1460	4418	11	Substantial	21.05%
Codington	3332	2958	8246	68	Substantial	17.47%
Corson	447	416	884	7	Substantial	41.67%
Custer	663	604	2354	9	Substantial	22.22%
Davison	2658	2487	5635	52	Substantial	15.99%
Day	513	446	1510	19	Substantial	16.05%
Deuel	397	353	984	6	Substantial	29.85%
Dewey	1237	1085	3456	11	Substantial	12.50%
Douglas	372	323	817	7	Substantial	36.00%
Edmunds	328	284	875	4	Substantial	13.13%
Fall River	430	388	2259	10	Substantial	20.80%
Faulk	309	284	588	10	Moderate	6.25%
Grant	807	722	1893	22	Substantial	30.60%
Gregory	478	429	1067	26	Substantial	26.09%
Haakon	225	177	463	7	Substantial	28.57%
Hamlin	583	510	1488	32	Substantial	13.60%
Hand	311	294	695	2	Moderate	10.34%
Hanson	306	286	594	3	Moderate	26.53%
Harding	88	79	151	1	Minimal	16.67%
Hughes	1947	1778	5479	25	Substantial	4.90%
Hutchinson	683	618	2009	14	Substantial	16.19%

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Hyde	131	129	360	0	Minimal	15.38%
Jackson	258	221	853	8	Substantial	14.71%
Jerauld	258	230	486	15	Moderate	18.18%
Jones	65	63	180	0	None	0.00%
Kingsbury	521	464	1394	13	Substantial	16.85%
Lake	998	916	2726	13	Substantial	21.74%
Lawrence	2450	2262	7497	27	Substantial	19.06%
Lincoln	6545	5919	17055	62	Substantial	20.67%
Lyman	511	487	1688	9	Substantial	11.59%
Marshall	254	221	982	4	Substantial	20.83%
McCook	661	601	1385	21	Substantial	24.00%
McPherson	175	159	492	1	Moderate	0.75%
Meade	2149	1952	6597	22	Substantial	20.20%
Mellette	215	196	647	2	Moderate	23.53%
Miner	219	195	495	6	Moderate	26.32%
Minnehaha	24263	22202	66559	251	Substantial	15.75%
Moody	522	462	1568	14	Substantial	28.57%
Oglala Lakota	1887	1708	6150	33	Substantial	22.40%
Pennington	10728	9574	33255	124	Substantial	23.06%
Perkins	274	224	655	9	Substantial	26.15%
Potter	297	285	705	2	Moderate	4.44%
Roberts	933	800	3709	26	Substantial	21.60%
Sanborn	301	291	605	3	Moderate	4.00%
Spink	688	608	1826	22	Substantial	12.64%
Stanley	263	243	756	2	Substantial	6.67%
Sully	103	96	242	3	Minimal	0.00%
Todd	1133	1054	3738	17	Substantial	25.00%
Tripp	617	567	1309	11	Substantial	10.71%
Turner	936	827	2336	47	Substantial	18.75%
Union	1540	1367	5260	30	Substantial	18.30%
Walworth	606	539	1605	14	Substantial	25.33%
Yankton	2399	2117	8135	23	Substantial	14.39%
Ziebach	283	231	693	7	Substantial	13.33%
Unassigned	0	0	1935	0		

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South Dakota

New Confirmed Cases 377	New Probable Cases 154	Active Cases 7,314	Recovered Cases 87,337	Currently Hospitalized 337
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Total Confirmed Cases 87,630	Total Probable Cases 8,410	RT-PCR Test Positivity Rate, Last 1 Day 20.9%	Total Persons Tested 365,126	Total Tests 732,239
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Ever Hospitalized 5,492	Deaths Among Cases 1,389	% Progress (October Goal: 44233 Tests) 327%	% Progress (November Goal: 44233 Tests) 402%	% Progress (December Goal: 44233 Tests) 260%
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AGE GROUP OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Age Range with Years	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
0-9 years	3555	0
10-19 years	10592	0
20-29 years	17582	3
30-39 years	15918	12
40-49 years	13729	22
50-59 years	13633	70
60-69 years	10884	174
70-79 years	5712	296
80+ years	4435	812

SEX OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Sex	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
Female	50193	675
Male	45847	714

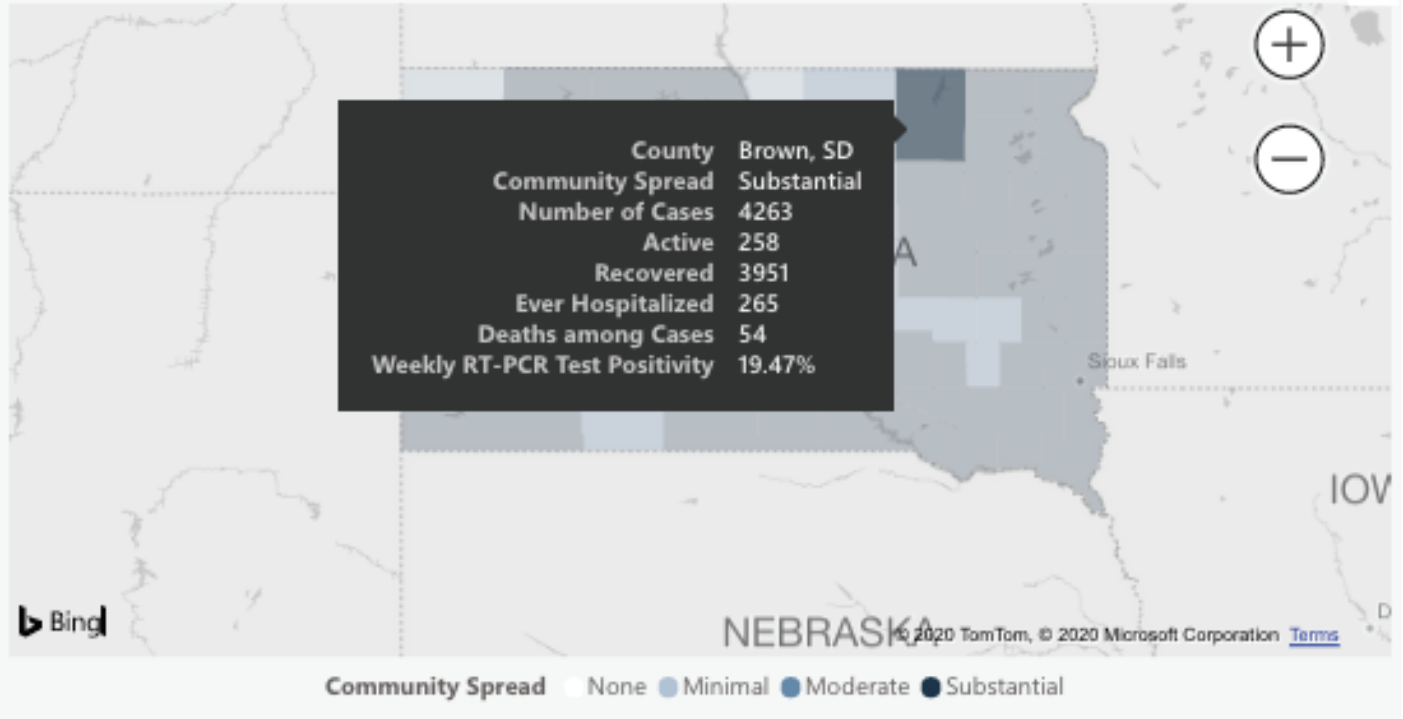
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Brown County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



Hover over a county to see its details, or click county to update the orange boxes.



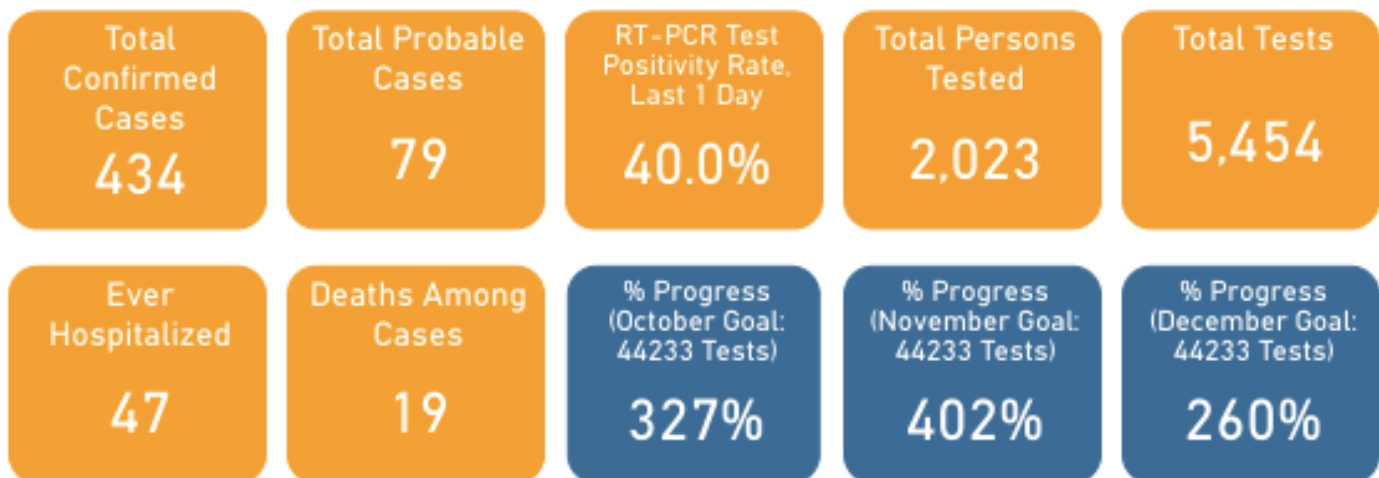
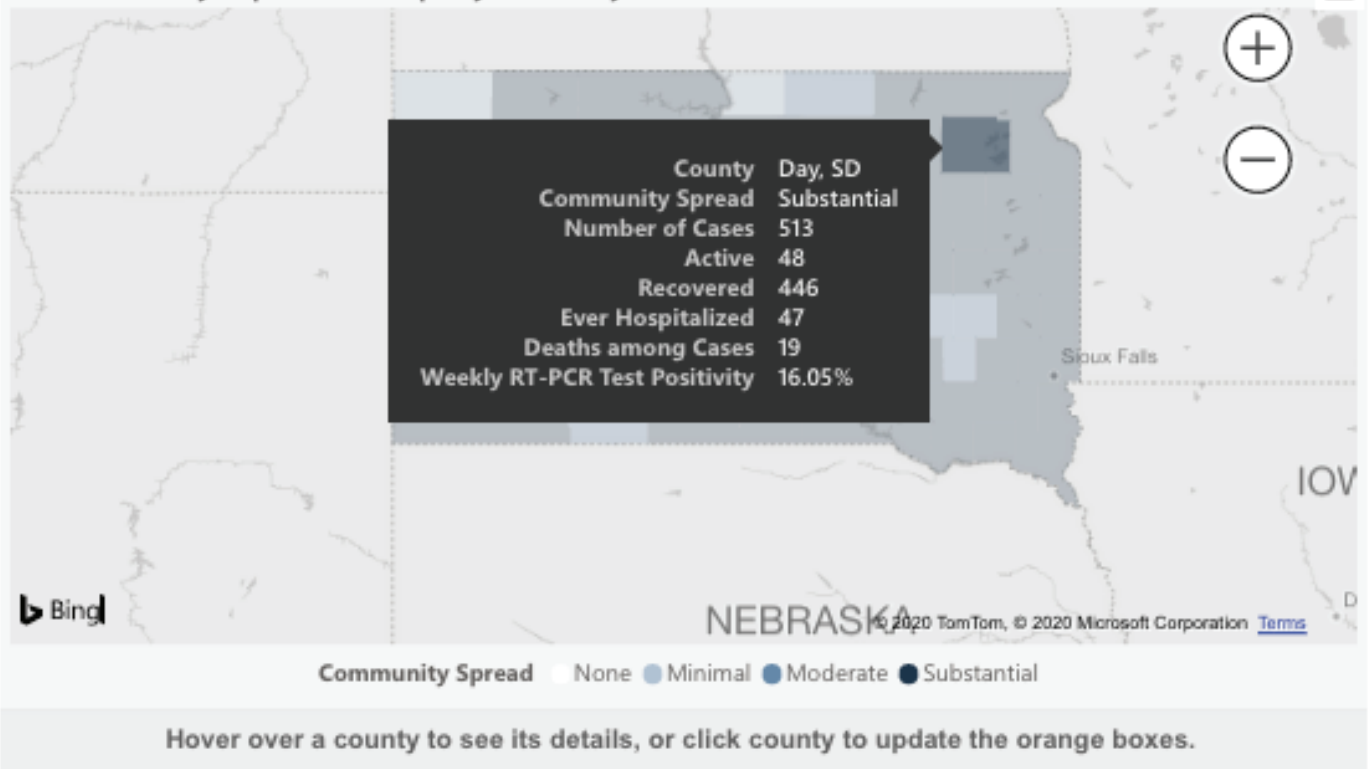
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Day County



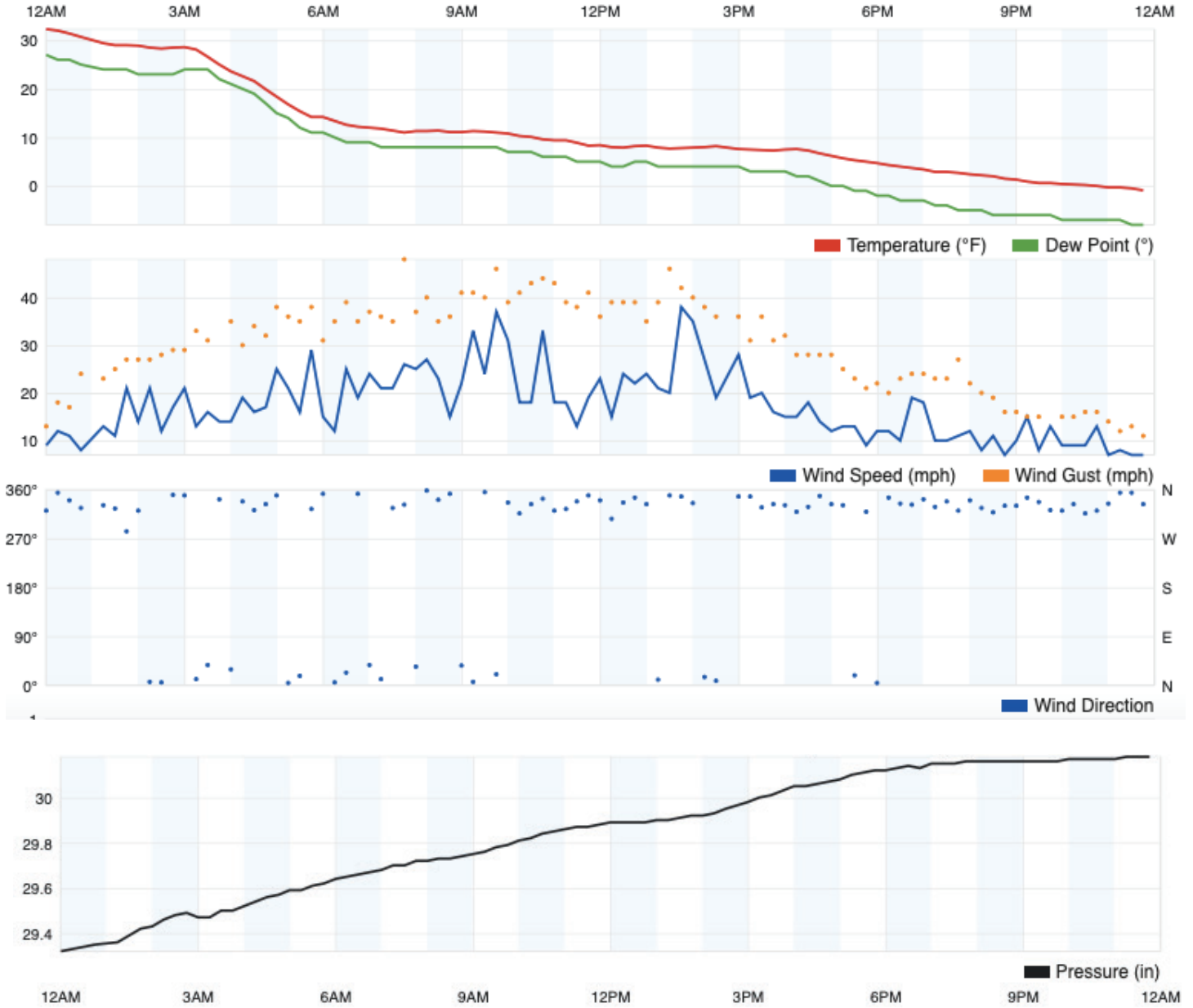
Community Spread Map by County of Residence



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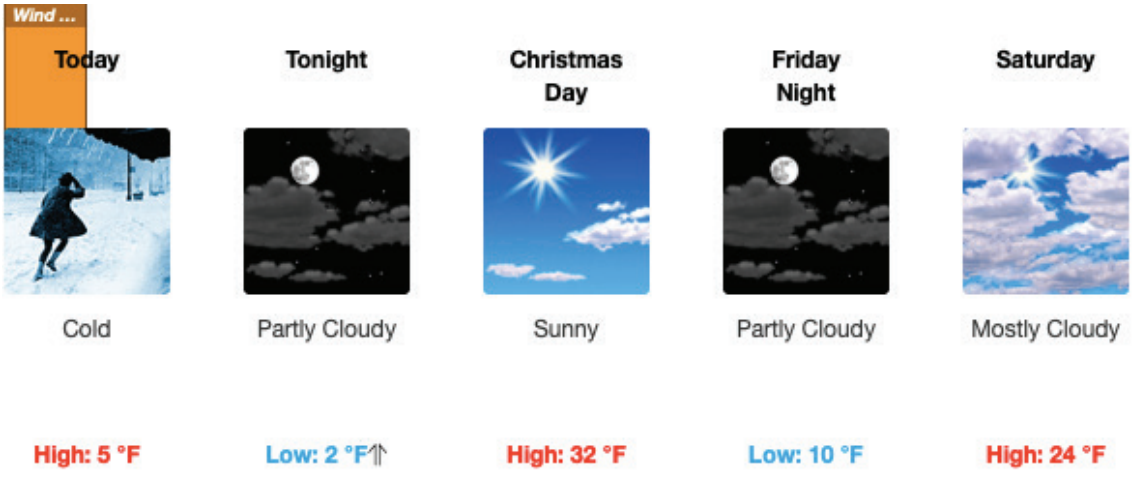
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today: Highs 5(East) – 30° (West)
Morning Wind Chills 15-30 Below(East)
Tonight: Lows -5(East) – 15° (West)
Windy across Sisseton Hills – Patchy Blowing Snow
Christmas: Warmer! Highs 32-45°

Expected Snowfall-Official NWS Forecast
Late Saturday through Sunday



High pressure will remain in control of our weather for the next couple days. Chilly, but dry conditions will persist today into tonight. Some downsloping winds overnight tonight could lead to some patchy blowing snow across the eastern slopes of the Sisseton Hills. Warmer weather will return for Christmas Day with temps back above freezing. By the end of the holiday weekend, a disturbance will move through the region bringing light snow back into the forecast. At this point, light accumulations up to a couple of inches are possible. With holiday travelers out on area roads, please stay tuned to the latest forecast the next couple days.

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Today in Weather History

December 24, 1985: Snow fell over western South Dakota on December 23, with the greatest amounts in the northern Black Hills. Strong winds gusting to 50-60 mph developed over the western part of the state on the evening of December 23rd and continued into the morning of the 24th, with gusts to above 40 mph in the east. The winds caused ground blizzard conditions in the northern and central sections of South Dakota, and many vehicles were reported in ditches. Many people were stranded for a time in Martin in Bennett County. Several roads were blocked entirely during this time, such as Highway 248 near Murdo in Jones County.

December 24, 1992: A deep area of low pressure traveled across the United States/Canada border, dragging a cold front southward across South Dakota and Minnesota by Christmas Day. Southerly winds gusted up to 50 mph over western Minnesota on the 23rd in advance of the storm, causing ground blizzard conditions. As the arctic cold front swept across the area, temperatures tumbled from the 20s and 30s to well below zero by Christmas morning. Wind gusts were up to 50 mph behind the front, causing ground blizzard conditions and wind chill readings from 40 to 60 degrees below zero. A church that was under construction in Litchfield in Meeker County, Minnesota, was destroyed by strong winds. Many motorists were stranded on Christmas Eve and spent the night at area homes and motels. Interstate 94 from Alexandria to Moorhead, MN, was closed for nearly eight hours. High winds gusted up to 55 mph in the Watertown, SD area, causing a steel frame building under construction to collapse sometime between 9 and 10 pm CST.

December 24, 2009: A broad upper-level low-pressure area over the Upper Midwest associated with an intense surface low-pressure area brought widespread heavy snow along with blizzard conditions to central and northeast South Dakota as well as west-central Minnesota. The storm was a slow mover and produced several rounds of snow over three days. Total snowfall amounts were from 7 to as much as 25 inches. The heavy snow combined with winds of 25 to 40 mph with gusts to 50 mph brought widespread blowing and drifting snow with visibilities frequently less than a quarter of a mile. This blizzard ranked in the top three for South Dakota snowfall with a state average of 15.4 inches. Most of the state received 10 inches of snow or more with many locations with 20 inches or more. Pollock in north-central South Dakota set an all-time high three-day snowfall total with 17 inches. Before the onset of the storm, the Governor declared a state of emergency for South Dakota. Large portions of both Interstates 29 and 90 across South Dakota were closed late on Thursday, December 24th. Both Interstates were closed through Christmas Day and into Saturday, December 26th. There were some stranded holiday travelers due to the road closings, along with a few rescues. Most roads were reopened by Sunday morning, December 27th. There were also several vehicle accidents with nothing serious. Several airports were also closed throughout the storm, along with a few spotty power outages occurring in Lyman County in central South Dakota. Total snowfall amounts over the three days predominantly ranged from 1 to 2 feet. Snowfall amounts with a foot or more included; 12 inches at Mobridge, Eureka, Waubay, and Eagle Butte; 13 inches at Highmore and Miller; 14 inches at

Castlewood, Summit, Watertown, Pierre, and Ree Heights; 15 inches at Groton, Gettysburg, Webster, Wilmot, Hayti, and McLaughlin; 16 inches at McIntosh, east of Hayes and east of Hosmer; 17 inches at Timber Lake, Britton, and Pollock; 18 inches near Victor; 20 inches near Keldron; 22 inches at Murdo; 23 inches at Sisseton and 25 inches at Kennebec. In west-central Minnesota Wheaton received 11 inches, Browns Valley received 15 inches with 16 inches at Ortonville and Artichoke Lake.

1963: At 0326 CDT on December 24th, 1963, a new all-time low for Memphis occurred with a reading of -13°F. The record still stands today.

1968: The crew of Apollo 8 took this photo, later dubbed "Earthrise," on December 24th, 1968. During a broadcast that night, pilot Jim Lovell said: "The vast loneliness is awe-inspiring, and it makes you realize just what you have back there on Earth."

1971: A commercial airliner encountered severe turbulence from a thunderstorm and broke up in mid-air over Peru. Juliane Koepcke, who was 17 years old, fell roughly 2 miles to earth, still strapped into her seat, survived with a broken collarbone, a gash to her right arm, and her right eye swollen shut. She traveled 11 days through the Peruvian rainforest before being rescued.

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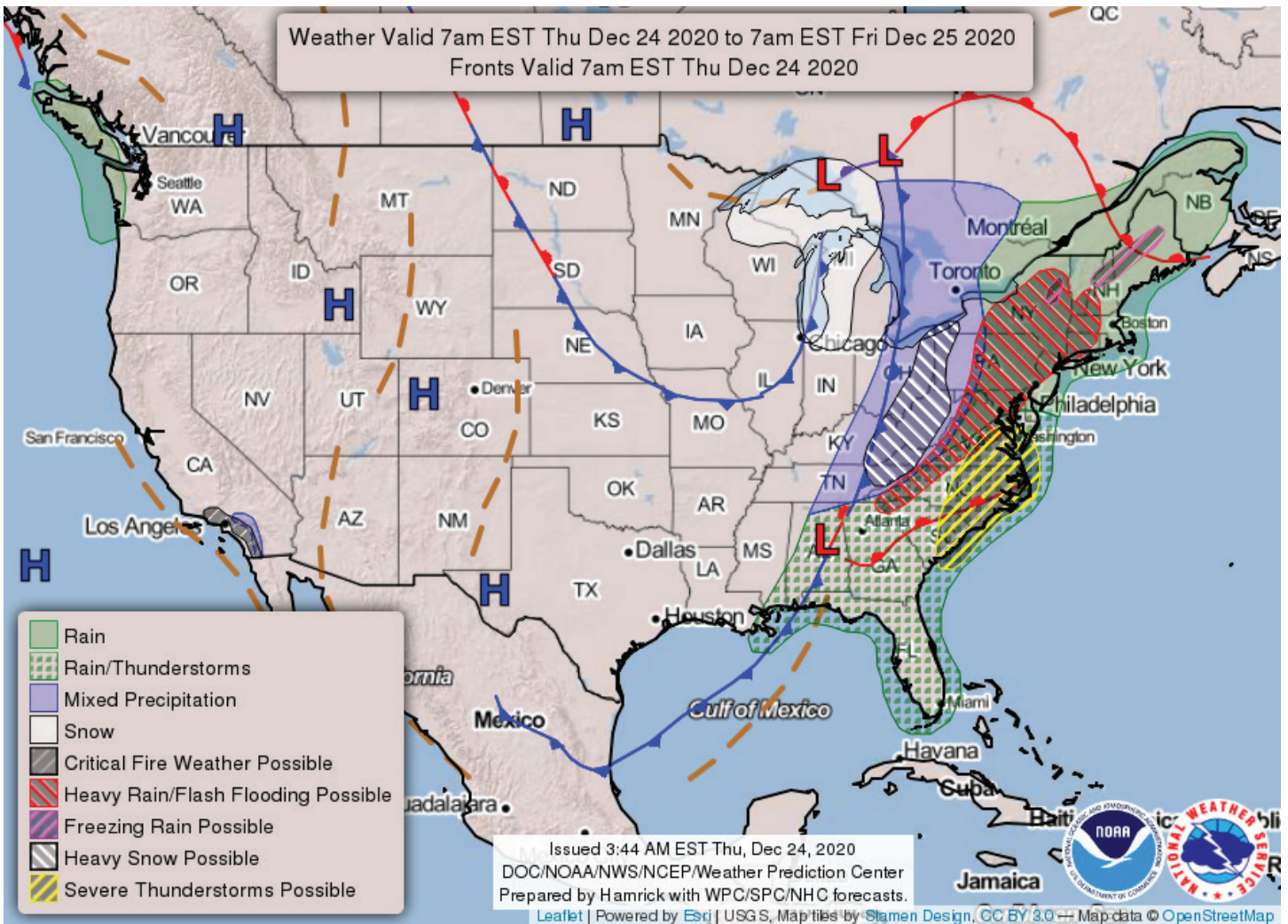
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 33 °F at 12:03 AM
Low Temp: -1 °F at 11:54 PM
Wind: 48 mph at 7:37 AM
Precip: .00

Today's Info

Record High: 50° in 1893, 1943
Record Low: -24° in 1996
Average High: 23°F
Average Low: 4°F
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.38
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 21.58
Precip Year to Date: 16.52
Sunset Tonight: 4:55 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:12 a.m.



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JOSEPH'S DREAM

"... Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. Joseph, her fiancé, was a good man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly.

As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. 'Joseph, son of David,' the angel said, 'do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'

All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord's message through his prophet:

'Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means "God is with us."'

When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife."

When the Lord calls us to do His work, and we are faithful and obedient to Him, great things happen!

Prayer: Father, when You call us to do Your work in Your world, may we accept the challenge, knowing that great things will happen that will bless us and others, and Your Name glorified. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Matthew 1:18-24 For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'

News from the Associated Press

Winter storm in Dakotas, Minnesota make travel frightful

By DAVE KOLPACK Associated Press

FARGO, N.D. (AP) — A storm that began with snow, strong winds and bitter cold into the eastern Dakotas and western Minnesota early Wednesday and began moving east was making travel treacherous and grounded flights on one of the most anticipated air travel days since the start of the coronavirus pandemic.

Blizzard warnings were posted in the region as National Weather Service officials called for wind chills to dip to 35 F below zero (-37C), pushed by gusts of more than 60 mph (96.5 kph). Numerous travel advisories urged motorists to stay off the road and several highways were shut down altogether

"Winter has come to the area," said Greg Gust, weather service meteorologist in Grand Forks, North Dakota.

The storm was centered in southeastern Minnesota and was expected to track steadily toward Eau Claire, Wisconsin, and northern Michigan by Wednesday night. The heaviest snow band stretched from the Iron Range in northeastern Minnesota back toward Watertown in eastern South Dakota, Gust said.

The storm was bearing down on the Twin Cities area Wednesday afternoon, where Gust said at least 8 inches (0.20 meters) of snow was expected. Eastbound Interstate 94 was closed between Monticello and Rogers, west of Minneapolis, for three hours due a multi-vehicle crash and pileup. State transportation officials said the interstate would likely be down to one lane each way overnight and warned travelers about vehicles in the ditch.

The Minneapolis-St. Paul airport had experienced about 300 flight cancellations and 40 delays as of Wednesday afternoon, airport spokesman Patrick Hogan said. It was expected to be the third busiest day of the Christmas holiday travel period, behind this upcoming Sunday and Saturday, he said.

"Many people were able to get out this morning, but it could be tough going this afternoon and evening," Hogan said.

Earlier in the day, a large gathering of people showed up at Hector International Airport in Fargo, North Dakota, only to discover that most of the flights had been canceled due to high winds and low visibilities.

"Today was going to be probably our busiest day since COVID hit or definitely just before Thanksgiving," said Shawn Dobberstein, Fargo Airport Authority executive director. "Our building was pretty full this morning when American, Delta, United decided to cancel some flights."

The heaviest wind gust was 62 mph (100 kph) in Fargo, Gust said. Conditions were starting to improve as the storm moved eastward, and Dobberstein was hopeful that flights would resume later in the afternoon.

Authorities in southeastern South Dakota were responding to several multiple-vehicle pileups, including one on I-29 north of Sioux Falls involving at least a dozen cars and a dozen semi-trailers, according to Dell Rapids volunteer firefighter Rick Morris. He said there were several non life-threatening injuries and some emergency response vehicles were stuck, the Argus Leader reported.

Other motorists in eastern North and South Dakota opted to wait out the storm. The Coffee Cup Travel Plaza, one of the few stops on I-94 in northeastern South Dakota, was quiet on Wednesday morning, said Dani Zubke, a worker at the store near the town of Summit.

"There's blowing snow, low visibility and no travel advised," she said. "It has been very slow. I don't know that there are a lot of people out and about. There are times you can only see to the end of our parking lot."

This story has been corrected to show that the metric conversion for the potential wind chill of minus 35 Fahrenheit is minus 37 Celsius, not 2C and the correct the spelling of a Summit worker's last name from Zuhke to Zubke.

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SD Lottery

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) _ These South Dakota lotteries were drawn Wednesday:

Dakota Cash

10-11-20-22-23

(ten, eleven, twenty, twenty-two, twenty-three)

Estimated jackpot: \$47,000

Lotto America

05-08-16-23-34, Star Ball: 10, ASB: 3

(five, eight, sixteen, twenty-three, thirty-four; Star Ball: ten; ASB: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$2.2 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$352 million

Powerball

06-13-38-39-53, Powerball: 6, Power Play: 3

(six, thirteen, thirty-eight, thirty-nine, fifty-three; Powerball: six; Power Play: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$321 million

Noem criticizes length of investigation into Ravensborg case

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem says the investigation into the death of a pedestrian who was struck by a vehicle driven by the state's attorney general is taking too long.

Noem said the Hyde County State's Attorney's Office should have decided by now whether Attorney General Jason Ravensborg should be indicted for the death of 55-year-old Joe Boever in September. Authorities say Ravensborg was distracted when he drifted onto the shoulder and struck Boever, but have not provided further details.

"I share South Dakotans' frustration about the amount of time that has taken," Noem said in a statement to the Argus Leader. "To have more than 100 days go by without resolution on this is a disservice to the victim's family."

The case is in the hands of assistant State's Attorney Emily Sovell. She has not responded to multiple messages and emails left with her office since the investigation started.

Ravensborg called 911 that night and told a dispatcher that he hit "something" on Highway 14 outside of Highmore and that "it was in the middle of the road." When the dispatcher asked if it could have been a deer, Ravensborg initially said, "I have no idea" before adding, "It could be."

Health officials ask for holiday caution amid case decline

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota health officials on Wednesday urged people to take coronavirus precautions during the holidays, saying gatherings threaten to undo the state's recent success in slowing infections.

December has been marked with good news, with new cases continuing to decline and COVID-19 vaccines arriving. The Department of Health reported 531 more people tested positive and no new deaths. However, the state this month has still reported the nation's highest rate of deaths per capita.

Secretary of Health Kim Malsam-Rysdon said the arrival of the state's first allotments of vaccine and the absence of a post-Thanksgiving spike in cases offered some reason for hope, though holiday gatherings still posed a threat.

"We really do have a light at the end of this tunnel, we just need people to hang in there," she said.

Health officials worried that people would let their guards down during the holiday, especially after the danger of infections has waned from a November peak.

"The opportunity is for people to think that it's OK to go back to pre-pandemic behavior," Malsam-Rysdon said. "We want to make sure people stay with what they need to do through this next holiday period so we don't see a post-Christmas spike."

GOP donor gives charities \$500,000 to honor Noem family

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Republican mega-donors Foster and Lynn Friess are giving \$500,000 to South Dakota faith-based charities in honor of Gov. Kristi Noem's family, the governor's office announced Wednesday.

Foster Friess, 79, is a wealthy investor and philanthropist from Jackson Hole, Wyoming who has donated millions to Republicans and conservative causes. He and his wife are making \$100,000 donations to five Christian charities in the name of each member of Noem's family.

Noem's office said the recipients are Compassion Child Care, Dakota Sonshine, McCrossan Boys Ranch, Teen Challenge of the Dakotas and Love Inc.

"Foster and Lynn are some of the most remarkable people that I have ever known, and I am so grateful for their generous gift to South Dakotans in need," Noem said in a statement.

Friess has played a role in Noem's rise to nation-wide prominence among conservatives, hosting her on a deep-sea fishing trip in 2019 where she connected with key figures in President Donald Trump's orbit. Corey Lewandowski, Trump's 2016 campaign manager, has advised Noem as she pursued a national profile.

Friess ran for governor in 2018, finishing second in Wyoming's Republican primary.

No Christmas Eve joy for truckers stuck in UK virus gridlock

By SYLVIA HUI Associated Press

DOVER, England (AP) — Trucks inched slowly past checkpoints at the English port of Dover and headed across the Channel on Thursday to the French port of Calais, after France partially reopened its borders with Britain following a scare over a rapidly spreading new coronavirus variant.

Only a small fraction of the thousands of frustrated truck drivers and travelers have so far made it through the mass gridlock at Dover on Christmas Eve, held up by slow delivery of the coronavirus tests now demanded by France. One by one, trucks passed toward ferries and trains that link Britain with France, as authorities checked that drivers had the negative virus tests required to cross.

On the French side, the vast Calais port — which normally takes in up to 4,000 trucks a day — remained quieter than usual.

"Due to the logistical issues that have prevented freight getting to the port, we have unfortunately only been able to transport 144 trucks out of Dover," shipping company DFDS said. The company is scrambling to arrange Christmas Day sailings to help resolve the problem, it added.

Officials warned the backlog could take days to clear. One U.K. road haulage expert estimated there could be 8,000 to 10,000 trucks caught up in the chaos near Dover but a government minister said it involved some 4,000 trucks.

French Ambassador Catherine Colonna said two dozen French firefighters have been sent to Dover, bringing 10,000 coronavirus tests for drivers desperate to get home for Christmas. British Transport Secretary Grant Shapps said British and French authorities have agreed to keep the border between the countries open throughout Christmas to help truck drivers and travelers get home.

Dozens of countries around the world began barring people from Britain last weekend after Prime Minister Boris Johnson said large areas of southern England including London had to be placed under harsher restrictions to curb a new, more contagious version of the virus.

France's temporary shutdown of the border raised the most concerns, since France is a major conduit for trade and travel between Britain and the continent. The U.K. relies heavily on cross-Channel commercial links to the continent for food at this time of year, especially fresh fruit and vegetables.

The announcement of the coronavirus variant came as Europe has been walloped by soaring new virus infections and deaths. Europe as a whole has recorded over 500,000 virus-related deaths, according to a tally by Johns Hopkins University that experts agree is probably an undercount due to missed cases and other factors.

Britain has seen soaring infection rates in recent weeks, with many hospitals nearing their capacities. On Wednesday, the country reported another 744 deaths and a record 39,237 confirmed new cases. Christ-

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mas gatherings and festive shopping were cancelled for millions at the last minute in a bid to control the spread of the virus.

London now has the highest rate of people testing positive in the country, according to the latest figures published by the Office for National Statistics. It estimated that 2.1% of people in the capital had COVID-19 in mid-December, compared to around 1.18%, or one in 85 people, for the wider population in England.

The majority of new positive cases in London were believed to be the coronavirus variant, the statistics office said.

In France, officials defended the country's handling of the border after the EU's transport commissioner issued unusually strong criticism.

Commissioner Adina Valean, of Romania, tweeted: "I deplore that France went against our recommendations and brought us back to the situation we were in in March when the supply chains were interrupted."

France's European affairs minister, Clement Beaune, tweeted back that France had "exactly followed the EU recommendation" and is now "more open than other European countries" to arrivals from Britain.

China on Thursday became the latest nation to suspend flights to and from the U.K.

Angela Charlton contributed from Paris.

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

'We are struggling': A bleak Christmas for America's jobless

By JOSEPH PISANI and CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Business Writers

NEW YORK (AP) — Last Christmas, Shanita Matthews cooked up a feast for her family of three: Roast chicken, barbecue spareribs, spinach, macaroni and cheese.

This year? They'll stick with tuna fish and crackers, among the few items she can afford at the supermarket.

"We're not really doing Christmas — I guess you can say it that way," said Matthews, who lives in Suwanee, Georgia. "We are struggling. We are tired, and all I have is my faith."

Like nearly 10 million other Americans, Matthews has been jobless since the viral pandemic ripped through the U.S. economy in March, triggering a devastating recession and widespread unemployment. Now, many months later, they face a holiday season they hardly could have foreseen a year ago: Too little money to buy gifts, cook large festive meals or pay all their bills.

Nearly 8 million people have sunk into poverty since June after having spent \$1,200 checks that the government gave most Americans in the spring and a \$600-a-week supplemental jobless benefit expired in July, according to research by Bruce Meyer at the University of Chicago and two other colleagues. And finding a job is getting even harder: Hiring in November slowed for a fifth straight month, with U.S. employers adding the fewest jobs since April.

Some relief may — potentially — be on the way. This week, Congress approved a \$900 billion pandemic rescue package that includes a \$300-a-week unemployment benefit, cash payments of up to \$600 for most individuals and a renewal of extended jobless aid programs that are about to expire. On Tuesday night, though, President Donald Trump injected doubts about that urgently needed federal aid by attacking the rescue package as inadequate and suggesting that he might not sign it into law.

Help, in the meantime, can't come soon enough for Matthews. With her bank balance now negative, she worries that her account could be closed if she doesn't receive financial aid soon.

Matthews, 41, has been struggling with her finances since she had to shut down her wedding business in March, when ceremonies were canceled and any need for the centerpieces and flower arrangements she made suddenly evaporated. Matthews was denied unemployment aid by Georgia's labor department. She doesn't understand why and is appealing the decision. But the process is so slow that she's waited months just to get a hearing.

Despite being a registered nurse, Matthews has been unable to land a job. She can work only late hours

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because she often needs to help her 6-year-old daughter, who must do virtual learning at home when virus cases spike at her school.

Matthews' car was repossessed after she couldn't keep up with payments. Most of what her husband earns goes to a \$1,600 mortgage on their home. That leaves them with about \$200 a month for groceries, utilities and a \$50 internet bill — a necessity for her daughter's schoolwork.

Matthews hopes that a relative can step in and buy a Christmas gift for her daughter.

"We want to be able to have food, water, heat," she said. "Those are the things that we care about."

Charities say they have been overwhelmed with requests for help, a sign many are in deep financial distress. The United Way expects the number of calls to the 211 hotline it funds to double from last year to 20 million calls, mostly from people needing help paying rent or electricity bills. Feeding America says many of the people showing up at food banks are first timers.

Out of desperation, Sheyontay Molton turned to Twitter for help after a series of events left her with no money to buy gifts for her four children.

Her children's father lost his job this year. Molton, who is 28 and lives in San Antonio, Texas, had to temporarily stop working as a delivery driver for DoorDash after falling debris from a truck severely damaged her car in October. She used part of her rent money to repair it, leaving her behind on bills.

Having noticed on Twitter that social media influencers and celebrities were providing cash to some needy people, Molton created an account and tweeted about her situation. Someone sent her \$200 through an app — money that she plans to use for groceries. Another couple on Twitter asked her to create an Amazon Wishlist and then bought her kids a doll, cars and other toys for Christmas.

Without the donations, Molton had planned to tell her young kids that Santa Claus couldn't come because he was taking extra coronavirus precautions.

"Silly, I know," she said, But "it would have bought me more time."

The struggles of low-income workers and the unemployed are contributing to a weak holiday shopping season that will likely drag on the overall economy. Retail sales fell 1.1% in November, a month that is typically strong as gift-buying gets under way. Some economists expect retail sales to decline again this month, particularly as governments impose more business restrictions and rising coronavirus cases keep consumers away from stores and restaurants.

A scaled-back holiday is what Summer Kluytman has been envisioning. She had to tell her two teenage sons not to expect the kinds of Christmas gifts they've typical received in the past, like the \$400 Oculus virtual reality headset that was under the tree last year.

Having lost two art teaching jobs, Kluytman had to go on food stamps to help pay for groceries. The salary of her husband, who works for a cable company, goes toward the rent for their home in St. Petersburg, Florida.

Kluytman is spending \$100 on each son this Christmas for hoodies and other clothing, down from the \$500 she spent on each last year. She plans to hold movie nights, where they'll gather in the living room to catch a flick.

"I think that they're cool with us spending time together as opposed to a bunch of stuff under the tree," she said. "But it does break my heart a little bit."

Rugaber reported from Washington.

20 migrants dead off Tunisia after boat sinks, more missing

By BOUAZZA BEN BOUAZZA Associated Press

TUNIS, Tunisia (AP) — About 20 African migrants were found dead Thursday after their smuggling boat sank in the Mediterranean Sea while trying to reach Europe, Tunisian authorities said. Five survivors were rescued and the Tunisian navy is searching for up to 20 others still believed missing.

Tunisian coast guard boats and local fishermen found and retrieved the bodies in the waters off the coastal city of Sfax in central Tunisia, Defense Ministry spokesman Mohamed Ben Zekri told The Associated Press.

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According to survivors, the migrant smuggling boat was carrying about 40 or 50 people heading toward Italy, Ben Zekri said.

The boat was overloaded and in poor condition, and faced strong winds Thursday morning that may have contributed to the sinking, said National Guard spokesman Ali Ayari. It was carrying migrants from sub-Saharan Africa, he told The AP.

Tunisian navy units were searching for any more survivors.

Tunisian authorities say they have intercepted several migrant smuggling boats recently but that the number of attempts has been growing, notably between the Sfax region and the Italian island of Lampedusa.

More than 1,100 migrants have died or disappeared in the Mediterranean this year, according to estimates from the International Organization for Migration.

Migrant smuggling boats frequently leave from the coast of Tunisia and neighboring Libya carrying people from across Africa, including a growing number of Tunisians fleeing prolonged economic difficulties in their country.

Tunisians have made up the vast majority of migrants arriving in Italy this year, despite efforts by Rome to negotiate with Tunis to put a stop to the crossings. Of the 34,001 migrants who had arrived in Italy so far this year, 12,847 were Tunisian, or 38%. Bangladeshis were the next biggest group, followed by those from Ivory Coast, Algeria, Pakistan and Egypt.

Nicole Winfield in Rome contributed.

UK, EU on cusp of striking Brexit trade deal at last

By RAF CASERT and JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — Negotiators from the European Union and Britain worked through the night and into Christmas Eve to put the finishing touches on a trade deal that should avert a chaotic economic break between the two sides next week.

Trade will change regardless come Jan. 1, when the U.K. leaves the bloc's single market and customs union. But both sides have been working furiously to avoid a nightmare scenario, in which the imposition of tariffs and duties would cost billions in trade and hundreds of thousands of jobs and potentially so snarl ports that many goods would struggle to get through. That possibility was starkly illustrated this week when a brief French blockade of British trucks over coronavirus concerns created chaos at ports that is still being sorted out.

After resolving nearly all of the remaining sticking points, negotiators combed through hundreds of pages of legal text Thursday that should become the blueprint for a post-Brexit relationship.

As during much of the nine-month negotiations, the issue of EU fishing fleets in British waters proved the most intractable and divisive, with negotiators still haggling over quotas for some individual species as dawn came and went.

Still, sources on both sides said the long and difficult negotiations were on the cusp of being wrapped up as negotiators, holed up at EU headquarters in Brussels with a stack of pizzas, worked to deliver the text to their leaders on Thursday.

Irish foreign affairs minister Simon Coveney said there appeared to be "some sort of last-minute hitch" over fish, but that it was not surprising. He said he expected announcements of a deal from London and Brussels "later on today."

The agreement would then go to the 27 EU nations seeking unanimous approval, as well as the blessing of the EU and British parliaments. It's expected to get those approvals.

Britain's currency, the pound, rose on expectations of a deal, up 0.5% against the dollar to just under \$1.36.

It has been 4 1/2 years since Britons voted 52%-48% to leave the EU in order to — in the words of the Brexiters' campaign slogan — "take back control" of the U.K.'s borders and laws.

It took more than three years of wrangling before Britain left the bloc's political structures on Jan. 31.

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Negotiating how to disentangle economies that were closely entwined as part of the EU's single market for goods and services took even longer.

Despite the apparent breakthrough, key aspects of the future relationship between the 27-nation bloc and its former member remain uncertain. But it leaves the mutually dependent, often fractious U.K.-EU relationship — and its 675 billion pounds (\$918 billion) in annual trade — on a much more solid footing than a disruptive no-deal split.

If a deal is announced, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson will be able to claim to have delivered on the promise that won him a resounding election victory a year ago: "Get Brexit Done."

Even with a deal, trade between Britain and the EU will face customs checks and other barriers on Jan. 1. But an agreement would avert the more disastrous effects of tariffs and duties. Britain withdrew from the EU on Jan. 31, and an economic transition period expires on Dec. 31.

Johnson has always insisted the U.K. will "prosper mightily" even if no deal is reached and the U.K. has to trade with the EU on World Trade Organization terms from Jan. 1.

But his government has acknowledged that a chaotic exit is likely to bring gridlock at Britain's ports, temporary shortages of some goods and price increases for staple foods. Tariffs will be applied to many U.K. exports, including 10% on cars and more than 40% on lamb, battering the U.K. economy as it struggles to rebound from the impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

Over the past few days, Johnson and EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen have been drawn more and more into the talks, speaking by phone in a bid to unblock negotiations that have dragged on for months, hampered by the pandemic and by the two sides' opposing views of what Brexit entails.

Rumors of a pre-Christmas trade deal surfaced in recent days based on progress on the main outstanding issues: fair competition, resolution of future disputes and fishing.

The EU has long feared that Britain would undercut the bloc's social, environmental and state aid rules to be able to gain an unfair edge with its exports to the EU. Britain has said that having to meet EU rules would undercut its sovereignty.

Compromise was finally reached on those "level playing field" issues, leaving the economically minor but hugely symbolic issue of fish to be the final sticking point. Maritime EU nations are seeking to retain access to U.K. waters where they have long fished, but Britain has been insisting it must exercise control as an "independent coastal state."

A huge gap between the two sides on fishing was gradually narrowed until it appeared, at last, bridgeable.

Johnson's large Conservative majority in Parliament should ensure that the Brexit trade agreement passes, but any compromises will be criticized by hardline Brexit supporters in his party. The party's euroskeptic European Research Group said it would carefully scrutinize any deal "to ensure that its provisions genuinely protect the sovereignty of the United Kingdom after we exit the transition period at the end of this year."

The European Parliament has warned it's now too late for it to approve the deal before Jan. 1, but an agreement could provisionally be put in place and approved by EU legislators in January.

Businesses on both sides are clamoring for a deal that would save tens of billions in costs.

While both sides would suffer economically from a failure to secure a trade deal, most economists think Britain would take a greater hit, because it is smaller and more reliant on trade with the EU than the other way around.

Lawless reported from London.

Follow all AP stories on the Brexit trade talks at <https://apnews.com/Brexit>

Coronavirus dampens Christmas joy in Bethlehem and elsewhere

By JOSEF FEDERMAN and JALAL HASSAN Associated Press

BETHLEHEM, West Bank (AP) — A stream of marching bands joyously paraded through Bethlehem on Thursday, but few people were there to greet them as the coronavirus pandemic and a strict lockdown

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dampened Christmas Eve celebrations in the traditional birthplace of Jesus.

Similar subdued scenes were repeated across the world as the festive family gatherings and packed prayers that typically mark the holiday were scaled back or canceled altogether. In Australia, worshippers had to book tickets online to attend socially distanced church services. Pope Francis was set to celebrate Mass in a near-empty Vatican service early in the evening, hours before a curfew went into effect in Italy.

Celebrations elsewhere in Europe were canceled or greatly scaled back as virus infections surge across the continent and a new variant that may be more contagious has been detected. Thousands of truck drivers and travelers were trapped in mass gridlock at Britain's Dover port on Christmas Eve, held up from crossing to France by the slow delivery of coronavirus tests demanded by French authorities.

In Bethlehem, officials tried to make the most out of a bad situation.

"Christmas is a holiday that renews hope in the souls," said Mayor Anton Salman. "Despite all the obstacles and challenges due to corona and due to the lack of tourism, the city of Bethlehem is still looking forward to the future with optimism and will celebrate Christmas in all its human and religious meanings."

Raw, rainy weather added to the gloomy atmosphere, as dozens of people gathered in the central Manger Square to greet the Latin Patriarch, the top Catholic clergyman in the Holy Land. Youth marching bands playing Christmas carols on bagpipes, accompanied by pounding drummers, led a procession ahead of the patriarch's arrival early in the afternoon.

Thousands of foreign pilgrims usually flock to Bethlehem for the celebrations. But the closure of Israel's international airport to foreign visitors kept tourists away this year. The Palestinian Authority last week banned intercity travel in the areas it administers in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, keeping even Palestinian visitors away.

The restrictions limited attendance to dozens of residents and a small entourage of religious officials. Evening celebrations, when pilgrims normally congregate around the Christmas tree, were canceled, and Midnight Mass celebrations were limited to clergy. The 85-year-old Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, who usually attends the solemn occasion, said he would not participate.

The coronavirus has dealt a heavy blow to Bethlehem's tourism sector, the lifeblood of the local economy. Restaurants, hotels and gift shops have been shuttered.

"The atmosphere of the Christmas celebrations is so beautiful in Bethlehem," said Balqees Qumsieh, a Bethlehem resident. "This year everything will be different."

Elsewhere, there was little holiday cheer for tourism-dependent Thailand, as the country grapples with an unexpected spike in virus cases, despite strict border controls that have effectively blocked travelers from entering the kingdom.

The Christmas and New Year's holidays are typically peak season for the tropical country's hotels, restaurants, bars and often naughtier-than-nice entertainment venues. Many of those businesses have decided it's not even worth opening or have gone out of business.

Shopping malls that cater heavily to foreign tourists are putting on a brave face, erecting towering artificial Christmas trees. Some hotels that remained open are putting on their usual buffets for resident expats and members of Thailand's moneyed elite.

But any hopes of a return to normalcy were dashed in recent days as the country recorded a new cluster of more than 1,000 cases. Authorities responded by announcing fresh restrictions on Bangkok and other areas that included canceling New Year's Eve celebrations.

Australians had until recently been looking forward to a relatively COVID-19-free Christmas after travel restrictions across state borders relaxed in recent weeks in the absence of any evidence of community transmission. But holiday plans were thrown into chaos when three cases detected on Dec. 17 exposed a new cluster in northern Sydney. As additional cases were detected, states again closed their borders.

Peta Johnson, a resident of northern Queensland, had been preparing to welcome her recently widowed father from Sydney. Travel restrictions have put the trip on hold until February.

"He is absolutely heartbroken because he wants to have some time with us and have a break from Sydney and everything that has been going on," she said.

Churches across the country were requiring worshippers to reserve tickets for services. Brett Mendez,

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spokesman for the Perth Archdiocese, said St. Mary's Catholic Cathedral would limit services to 650 worshippers, just over half the normal level.

While many places around the globe were keeping or increasing restrictions for Christmas, Lebanon was an exception. With its economy in tatters and parts of its capital destroyed by a massive Aug. 4 port explosion, Lebanon has lifted most virus measures ahead of the holidays, hoping to encourage spending. Tens of thousands of Lebanese expatriates have arrived home for the holidays, leading to fears of an inevitable surge in cases during the festive season.

Lebanon has the largest percentage of Christians in the Middle East — about a third of its 5 million people — and traditionally celebrates Christmas with much fanfare.

But even with restrictions relaxed, a severe economic crisis was pouring gloom over the holidays this year. The streets of Beirut, traditionally lit with Christmas lights, are more subdued. Shops may have new products, but few people are buying.

A giant Christmas tree in downtown Beirut is decorated with the uniforms of firefighters to commemorate those who died in the port explosion. Another tree represents Beirut's ancient houses destroyed in the blast.

"People around us were tired, depressed and depleted, so we said let's just plant a drop of joy and love," said Sevine Ariss, one of the organizers of a Christmas fair along the seaside road where the explosion caused the most damage.

Federman reported from Jerusalem. Jalal Hassan in Bethlehem, Adam Schreck in Bangkok, Rod McGuirk in Canberra, Australia and Zeina Karam in Beirut contributed reporting.

New round of Trump clemency benefits Manafort, other allies

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump pardoned more than two dozen people, including former campaign chairman Paul Manafort and Charles Kushner, the father of his son-in-law, in the latest wave of clemency to benefit longtime associates and supporters.

The actions, in Trump's waning time at the White House, bring to nearly 50 the number of people whom the president has granted clemency in the last week. The list from the last two days includes not only multiple people convicted in the investigation into the Trump campaign's ties to Russia but also allies from Congress and other felons whose causes were championed by friends.

Pardons are common in the final stretch of a president's tenure, the recipients largely dependent on the individual whims of the nation's chief executive. Trump throughout his administration has shucked aside the conventions of the Obama administration, when pardons were largely reserved for drug offenders not known to the general public, and instead bestowed clemency on high-profile contacts and associates who were key figures in an investigation that directly concerned him.

Even members of the president's own party raised eyebrows, with Republican Sen. Ben Sasse of Nebraska issuing a brief statement that said: "This is rotten to the core."

The pardons Wednesday of Manafort and Roger Stone, who months earlier had his sentence commuted by Trump, were particularly notable, underscoring the president's desire to chip away at the results and legacy of special counsel Robert Mueller's Russia investigation. He has now pardoned five people convicted in that investigation, four of them associates like former national security adviser Michael Flynn and campaign adviser George Papadopoulos, both of whom pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI.

"The pardons from this President are what you would expect to get if you gave the pardon power to a mob boss," tweeted Andrew Weissmann, a Mueller team member who helped prosecute Manafort.

Manafort, who led Trump's campaign during a pivotal period in 2016 before being ousted over his ties to Ukraine, was among the first people charged as part of Mueller's investigation into ties between the Trump campaign and Russia. He was later sentenced to more than seven years in prison for financial crimes related to his political consulting work in Ukraine, but was released to home confinement last spring.

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because of coronavirus concerns in the federal prison system.

Though the charges against Manafort did not concern the central thrust of Mueller's mandate — whether the Trump campaign and Russia colluded to tip the election — he was nonetheless a pivotal figure in the investigation.

His close relationship to a man U.S. officials have linked to Russian intelligence, and with whom he shared internal campaign polling data, attracted particular scrutiny during the investigation, though Mueller never charged Manafort or any other Trump associate with conspiring with Russia.

Manafort, in a series of tweets, thanked Trump and lavished praise on the outgoing president, declaring that history would show he had accomplished more than any of his predecessors.

Trump did not pardon Manafort's deputy, Rick Gates, who was sentenced last year to 45 days in prison after extensively cooperating with prosecutors, or former Trump lawyer Michael Cohen, who pleaded guilty to campaign finance crimes related to his efforts to buy the silence of women who said they had sexual relationships with Trump. Both were also convicted in the Mueller probe.

New York City prosecutors, meanwhile, have been seeking to have the state's highest court revive state mortgage fraud charges against Manafort after a lower court dismissed them on double jeopardy grounds. A spokesman for District Attorney Cy Vance said the pardon "underscores the urgent need to hold Mr. Manafort accountable for his crimes against the People of New York."

Manafort and Stone are hardly conventional pardon recipients, in part because both were scolded by judges for effectively thumbing their nose at the criminal justice system as their cases were pending. Manafort was accused of witness tampering even after he was indicted and was accused by prosecutors of lying while trying to earn credit for cooperation.

Stone, who was convicted of lying to Congress about his efforts to gain inside information about the release by WikiLeaks of Russia-hacked Democratic emails during the 2016 campaign, was similarly censured by a judge because of his social media posts.

In a statement Wednesday, Stone thanked Trump and alleged that he had been subjected to a "Soviet-style show trial on politically-motivated charges"

Kushner is the father of Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, and a wealthy real estate executive who pleaded guilty years ago to tax evasion and making illegal campaign donations. Trump and the elder Kushner knew each other from real estate circles and their children were married in 2009.

Prosecutors allege that after Kushner discovered that his brother-in-law was cooperating with authorities, he hatched a revenge and intimidation scheme. They say he hired a prostitute to lure his brother-in-law, then arranged to have a secret recording of the encounter in a New Jersey motel room sent to his own sister, the man's wife.

Former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie has called it "one of the most loathsome, disgusting crimes" he ever prosecuted as U.S. attorney.

Trump's legally troubled allies were not the only recipients of clemency. The list of 29 recipients included people whose pleas for forgiveness have been promoted by people supporting the president throughout his term in office, among them former Florida Attorney General Pam Bondi, Newsmax CEO Christopher Ruddy and Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky.

One recipient was Topeka Sam, whose case was promoted by Alice Johnson, a criminal justice advocate whom Trump pardoned and who appeared in a Super Bowl ad for him and at the Republican National Convention.

"Ms. Sam's life is a story of redemption," the White House said in its release, praising her for helping other women in need.

Others granted clemency included a former county commissioner in Florida who was convicted of taking gifts from people doing business with the county and a community leader in Kentucky who was convicted of federal drug offenses.

Associated Press writers Jill Colvin in Palm Beach, Florida, and Michael Balsamo in Washington contributed to this report.

Court orders release of man charged in Daniel Pearl killing

By KATHY GANNON and ADIL JAWAD Associated Press

KARACHI, Pakistan (AP) — A provincial court in Pakistan on Thursday ordered the release of a British-born Pakistani man charged in the 2002 murder of American journalist Daniel Pearl.

The Sindh High Court's release order overturns government detention orders that Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh, the key suspect in Pearl's slaying, should remain in custody. Sheikh was acquitted earlier this year of murdering Pearl, but has been held while Pearl's family appeals the acquittal.

"The detention order is struck down," said Faisal Siddiqi, the family's lawyer. He said Sheikh would be freed until the appeal is completed, but would return to prison if the family is successful in overturning the acquittal.

However, Siddiqi said the Sindh provincial government is appealing the order to release Sheikh.

Sheikh's lawyer Mehmood A. Sheikh, with whom he is not related, called for his client's immediate release.

The court order, a copy of which was obtained by The Associated Press, said the provincial government's detention orders were illegal and that neither the provincial nor the federal government had cause to keep Sheikh or three others, also charged in Pearl's murder, behind bars.

Sheikh was sentenced to death and the others to life in prison for their role in the plot. But in April, the Sindh High Court acquitted them, a move that stunned the U.S. government, Pearl's family and journalism advocacy groups.

The acquittal is now being appealed separately by both the Pakistani government and Pearl's family. The government has opposed Sheikh's release, saying it would endanger the public. The Supreme Court will resume its hearing on Jan. 5.

Siddiqi, the Pearl family lawyer, said he expects the appeal to be decided by the Supreme Court by the end of January.

Sheikh was convicted of helping lure Pearl to a meeting in the southern Pakistani port city of Karachi, in which he was kidnapped. Pearl had been investigating the link between Pakistani militants and Richard C. Reid, dubbed the "Shoe Bomber" after trying to blow up a flight from Paris to Miami with explosives hidden in his shoes.

A gruesome video of Pearl's beheading was sent to the U.S. consulate. The 38-year-old Wall Street Journal reporter from Encino, California was abducted Jan. 23, 2002.

In Sheikh's original trial, emails between Sheikh and Pearl presented in court showed Sheikh gained Pearl's confidence sharing their experiences as both waited for the birth of their first child. Pearl's wife Marianne Pearl gave birth to a son, Adam, in May 2002.

Evidence entered into court accused Sheikh of luring Pearl to his death, giving the American journalist a false sense of security as he promised to introduce him to a cleric with militant links.

Gannon reported from Islamabad

In a northern town brutalized by IS, Iraq tests its power

By SAMYA KULLAB Associated Press

SINJAR, Iraq (AP) — One by one, the flags belonging to a patchwork of armed forces were lowered in a northern Iraqi town once brutalized by the Islamic State group. The territorial claims symbolized by each were replaced by the fluttering of just one: The Iraqi state's.

The hoisting of the national flag in Sinjar, home to Iraq's Yazidi religious minority, is the result of a deal months in the making for the federal government to restore order from a tangled web of paramilitaries, who sowed chaos in the district during the bedlam following liberation from IS three years ago.

This month, Iraq's army deployed there for the first time since the 2003 fall of Saddam Hussein.

Lt. Imad Hasan hiked up a rocky ascent overlooking the deserted ruins of Sinjar's old town, vacant since IS was dislodged. His gaze fell on a lookout on the other side of the mountain — the last, he said, that

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belongs to a local affiliate of an outlawed Kurdish guerrilla group, known as the PKK.

"We have problems with them," he said. "Their leaders have agreed to withdraw, but some of their fighters have not."

Sealing the deal was hard enough. Implementing it brings new problems. Critics say it will take more than a change of flags to cement rule of law in Sinjar.

The Yazidis, traumatized by the mass killing and enslavement that IS unleashed against them, have no trust in the Iraqi authorities they say abandoned them to the militants' brutality. With the central government weak, they fear militias — including Iranian-backed Shiite factions — will gain sway over them.

The militias policing Sinjar the past three years are a mix. They include peshmerga fighters from Iraq's Kurdish autonomy zone, as well as the PKK and its affiliate made up of local Yazidi fighters, called the Sinjar Resistance Units or YBS. There are also Yazidi units belonging to the Popular Mobilization Forces, an umbrella group of state-sanctioned paramilitaries created in 2014 to defeat IS.

There are signs of recovery of Sinjar. Its city center hummed with shoppers, merchants — and the odd Iraqi army tank. More of the 200,000 Yazidis displaced by the 2014 IS onslaught are coming back — some 21,600 returning between June to September, many times the rate of previous years.

But scratch the surface, and almost everyone harbors raw, unresolved trauma. Everyone vividly recalls the IS attack that murdered fathers and sons, enslaved thousands of women and sent survivors fleeing up Sinjar mountain.

In Sinjar's market, a farmer, Zaidan Khalaf, introduced himself first by telling The Associated Press how many relatives he lost under IS: 18. Others in the market did the same.

"We lost our dignity," he said.

Communities remain deeply divided and bitterly resentful of one another.

"What agreement?" scoffed Farzo Mato Sabo, an 86-year-old in the predominantly Yazidi village of Tal Binat, south of Sinjar. She and her three daughters were taken by IS militants and later saved by smugglers. Eleven of her family members are still unaccounted for.

"I lost everyone," she sobbed. "Will it bring them back?"

Neighboring Tal Binat is the Sunni Arab village of Khailo.

"We used to be like brothers, but now the Yazidis stay away from us," said a tribal elder, Sheikh Naif Ibrahim. "They can't distinguish between civilians and IS members."

Many Yazidis accuse local Sunni Arabs of supporting IS. Since the militants' fall, Sunni Arabs have had frictions with Yazidi militias — and a number of Sunnis have been killed. At the same time, many Yazidis reject the Kurdish peshmerga, who consider the Sinjar area part of their domain.

"Seven flags ruled over us, you never knew who had power over you which day," said Khalaf, the farmer.

The U.N. has focused on the return of displaced Yazidis, but this is not the only criterion for success, said Sajad Jiyad, a fellow at The Century Foundation. "It's about services, schools, security and the ability to move around without being shaken down by various groups," he said.

"This is a test for the effectiveness of post-war governance and post-war liberation," he said. "Is the government prepared enough to allow the return to normalcy?"

The Iraqi military will secure the area for now, with other factions leaving their positions, although many remain in the Sinjar area. Under the plan, the Kurdish authority is to appoint a mayor — a prospect many Yazidis oppose — and local police are eventually to take over security, working under the government's intelligence agency and National Security Adviser. The plan calls for 2,500 new security personnel to be hired locally.

Most Yazidi leaders and residents interviewed said they were irate the community was not consulted by the government in the making of the plan.

"We are the ones who sacrificed, lost our lives," said Fahed Hamed, Sinjar's district mayor. "We should have been the main interlocutors."

"We want a force from our own. We don't trust anyone."

The force most trusted by locals is a faction the plan seeks to eject — the YBS, whose fighters are

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largely Sinjar Yazidis. While other forces retreated from the IS onslaught in 2014, many recall it was the YBS that fought to secure a safe route for civilians.

"They were the only ones who stayed to protect us," said Sherko Khalaf, a Yazidi village mukhtar.

Despite protests by locals, negotiations led to the withdrawal of YBS from Sinjar's city center.

YBS fighters interviewed said they expected to be subsumed as a unit of the Popular Mobilization Forces, providing them with much-needed political legitimacy. A portion of the 2,500-3,500 YBS fighters are already on the PMF payroll.

In theory, the plan calls for the PMF to end its presence in the city as well. To date, they are supporting forces and securing Sinjar's peripheries. But Khal Ali, the commander of the Lalish Brigades, a Yazidi unit of the group, told the AP, "The (PMF) will stay forever, we are kings over the heads of the security forces in Sinjar."

That prospect has divided Yazidis. Some want Yazidi PMF factions included in the security arrangement. Others fear it will bring Sinjar under the influence of the Shiite Arab factions close to Iran that dominate the umbrella group.

"If the international community and central government don't care about Sinjar, the PMF will take control," one prominent Yazidi leader said, requesting anonymity to speak freely. "This is clear."

Africa CDC: New virus variant appears to emerge in Nigeria

By CARA ANNA Associated Press

NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) — Another new variant of the coronavirus appears to have emerged in Nigeria, Africa's top public health official said Thursday, but he added that further investigation was needed.

The discovery could add to new alarm in the pandemic after similar variants were announced in Britain and South Africa, leading to the swift return of international travel restrictions and other measures just as the world enters a major holiday season.

"It's a separate lineage from the UK and South Africa," the head of the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, John Nkengasong, told reporters. He said the Nigeria CDC and the African Center of Excellence for Genomics of Infectious Diseases in that country — Africa's most populous — will be analyzing more samples.

"Give us some time ... it's still very early," he said.

The alert about the apparent new variant was based on two or three genetic sequences, he said, but that and South Africa's alert late last week were enough to prompt an emergency meeting of the Africa CDC this week.

The variant was found in two patient samples collected on Aug. 3 and on Oct. 9 in Nigeria's Osun state, according to a working research paper seen by The Associated Press.

Unlike the variant seen in the UK, "we haven't observed such rapid rise of the lineage in Nigeria and do not have evidence to indicate that the P681H variant is contributing to increased transmission of the virus in Nigeria. However, the relative difference in scale of genomic surveillance in Nigeria vs the U.K. may imply a reduced power to detect such changes," the paper says.

The news comes as infections surge again in parts of the African continent.

The new variant in South Africa is now the predominant one there, Nkengasong said, as confirmed infections in the country approach 1 million. While the variant transmits quickly and viral loads are higher, it is not yet clear whether it leads to a more severe disease, he said.

"We believe this mutation will not have an effect" on the deployment of COVID-19 vaccines to the continent, he said of the South Africa variant.

South Africa's health minister late Wednesday announced an "alarming rate of spread" in that country, with more than 14,000 new cases confirmed in the past day, including more than 400 deaths. It was the largest single-day increase in cases.

The country has more than 950,000 infections and COVID-19 is "unrelenting," Health Minister Zwelini Mkhize said.

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The African continent now has more than 2.5 million confirmed cases, or 3.3% of global cases. Infections across the continent have risen 10.9% over the past four weeks, Nkengasong said, including a 52% increase in Nigeria and 40% increase in South Africa.

For the first time since confirming sub-Saharan Africa's first virus case in February, Nigeria is in the spotlight during this pandemic as infections surge.

"Over recent weeks, we've had a huge increase in number of samples to (Nigeria CDC) reference lab," the CDC director-general Chikwe Ihekweazu tweeted on Thursday. "This has led to an unusual delay with testing, but we're working around the clock," with many colleagues cutting short their holidays and returning to work.

Nigeria now has more than 80,000 confirmed coronavirus cases.

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

Santa's 'grandchildren' spread joy in Italian nursing homes

By COLLEEN BARRY and LUCA BRUNO Associated Press

ALZANO LOMBARDO, Italy (AP) — Emotions are running high this holiday season at the Martino Zanchi Foundation nursing home in northern Italy near Bergamo after months of near-total isolation for its residents.

Long-time resident Celestina Comotti was disbelieving as a staff member read aloud a Christmas greeting from a family peering at her expectantly over a video call.

"Damn!" Comotti exclaimed when nursing home staff confirmed that her well-wishers - 9-year-old Simon, his sister Marta and mother Alessia - were people she had never met before. The 81-year-old woman dissolved into tears.

"I am trembling," she said, adjusting her eyeglasses.

Despite a grim year marked by death and loneliness, the holiday spirit is descending on the Zanchi nursing home, one of the first in Italy to shut its doors to visitors after a COVID-19 case was confirmed in the nearby hospital on Feb. 23.

The bearers of glad tidings were the so-called "grandchildren of Santa Claus," people who answered a charity's call to spread cheer to elderly nursing home residents, many of whom live far from their families or don't have any family members left.

The "Santa's grandchildren" program is in its third year. Last year, it matched 2,550 "grandchildren" with residents of 91 nursing homes. This year, 5,800 gifts were dispatched to 228 nursing homes around the country -- an outpouring that is, in part, a reaction to the devastating toll that the coronavirus has had on the elderly, comprising the majority of Italy's confirmed 70,000 COVID-19 dead.

This was the Zanchi nursing home's first year participating in the "Santa's grandchildren" program. The town of Alzano Lombardo, where the home is located, was one of the hardest hit in Bergamo province, where Italy's first domestically transmitted coronavirus infections cases were discovered and touched off the country's deadly spring surge.

Michela Valle, the home's activities coordinator, said her goal wasn't so much about fulfilling elderly Italians' wishes for holiday gifts but "about creating ties." The program matched benefactors with 43 Zanchi residents this season. Valle hopes that one day, when pandemic eases substantially, there can be in-person meetings.

The recipients wore Santa hats during the virtual visits with their volunteer grandchildren. They received gifts to unwrap during the calls, too. Comotti's adoptive family sent her a shawl, just as she had requested.

"Blue, like your eyes," nursing home director Maria Giulia Madaschi said. Comotti laughed happily as the workers wrapped the shawl around her.

Tami "Mario" Palmiro was thrilled with his baseball cap emblazoned with the name of Bergamo's Atalanta Serie A professional soccer team, provoking a stadium cheer from the 81-year-old, before he, too, broke down in tears.

Palmiro arrived at the nursing home in August, undergoing a transition more wrenching than usual due to virus-control procedures that strictly limit family visits, Madaschi said.

One of the "grandchildren," Ilaria Sacco, said she signed up because she was unable to travel home to Italy from California for Christmas this year, and wanted to feel connected. Another, Caterina Damiano, explained that she had lost both of her grandparents this year "but I still want to be a grandchild."

Madaschi said she often found herself moved to tears by the interactions, as the "nipoti" and "nonni" found common ground. Many are already creating ties, sometimes with real relatives facilitating contact with the new "nipoti."

"The guests could perceive the Christmas spirit, the joy of the holiday -- to be able to unwrap and gift, such a normal event in this anomalous period in which we are living," she said. "It has been a wonderful experience. To be repeated."

Barry reported from Milan. Charlene Pele contributed from Alzano Lombardo and Alberto Pellaschi contributed from Rome.

One Good Thing at AP: <https://apnews.com/hub/one-good-thing>

'Mom, we need food': Thousands in South Sudan near famine

By SAM MEDNICK Associated Press

LEKUANGOLE, South Sudan (AP) — After nearly a week of hiding from conflict, Kallayn Keneng watched two of her young children die. "They cried and cried and said, 'Mom, we need food,'" she said. But she had nothing to give. Too frail to bury her 5-year-old and 7-year-old after days without eating, she covered their bodies with grass and left them in the forest.

Now the mourning 40-year-old awaits food aid, one of more than 30,000 people said to be in likely famine in South Sudan's Pibor county. The new finding by international food security experts means this could be the first part of the world in famine since one was declared in 2017 in another part of the country then deep in civil war.

South Sudan is one of four countries with areas that could slip into famine, the United Nations has warned, along with Yemen, Burkina Faso and northeastern Nigeria.

Pibor county this year has seen deadly local violence and unprecedented flooding that have hurt aid efforts. On a visit to the town of Lekuangole this month, seven families told The Associated Press that 13 of their children starved to death between February and November.

The head of Lekuangole's government, Peter Golu, said he received unprecedented reports from community leaders that 17 children had died from hunger there and in surrounding villages between September and December.

The Famine Review Committee's report, released this month by the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, stops short of declaring famine because of insufficient data. But famine is thought to be occurring, meaning at least 20% of households face extreme food gaps and at least 30% of children are acutely malnourished.

But South Sudan's government is not endorsing the report's findings. If a famine were occurring it would be seen as a failure, it says.

"They are making assumptions. ... We are here dealing with facts, they are not on the ground," said John Pangech, the chair of South Sudan's food security committee. The government says 11,000 people across the country are on the brink of starvation — far less than the 105,000 estimated by the new report by food security experts.

The government also expects that 60% of the country's population, or some 7 million people, could face extreme hunger next year, with the hardest hit areas in Warrap, Jonglei and Northern Bahr el Ghazal states.

South Sudan has been struggling to recover from a five-year civil war. Food security experts say the magnitude of the hunger crisis has been mostly created by the fighting. That includes bouts of violence

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this year between communities with alleged support from the government and opposition.

The government "is not only denying the severity of what is happening but is denying the basic fact that its own policies and military tactics are responsible," said Alex de Waal, author of "Mass Starvation: The History and Future of Famine" and executive director of the World Peace Foundation.

More than 2,000 people have been killed this year in localized violence that's been "weaponized" by people acting in their own interests, the head of the U.N. mission in South Sudan, David Shearer, has said. Violence has prevented people from cultivating, blocked supply routes, burned down markets and killed aid workers.

Families in Lekuangle said their crops were destroyed by the fighting. They now subsist on leaves and fruits.

During violence in July, Kidrich Korok's 9-year-old son Martin became separated from the family and spent more than a week in the forest. By the time he was found, severely malnourished, it was too late.

"He would always tell me that he'd study hard and do something good for me when he grew up," Korok said, weeping. "Even while he was dying, he kept reassuring me that I shouldn't worry."

Staff at the health clinic in Lekuangle registered 20 severely malnourished children in the first week and a half of December, more than five times the number of cases for the same period last year, said a nurse, Gabriel Gogol.

Flooding has cut off most road access to Pibor town and its better medical care, forcing some severely sick children to travel for three days along the river in flimsy plastic rafts.

Officials in Pibor county say they don't understand why South Sudan's government isn't acknowledging the scale of the hunger.

"If people are saying in (the capital) that there's no famine in Pibor, they're lying and want people to die," said David Langole Varo, who works for the humanitarian arm of the government in the Greater Pibor Administrative Area.

In Pibor town, malnourished mothers and children wait for hours outside health clinics, hoping for food.

In a joint statement last week, three U.N. agencies called for immediate access to parts of Pibor county where people were facing catastrophic levels of hunger.

The World Food Program has faced challenges in delivering aid this year. Approximately 635 metric tons of food were stolen from Pibor county and Jonglei state, enough to feed 72,000 people, and an air drop of food in Lekuangle killed an elderly woman in October.

The WFP said it needs more than \$470 million over the next six months to address the hunger crisis.

Families now worry about a resurgence in fighting as the dry season approaches.

Sitting in a clinic run by Doctors Without Borders in Pibor town, Elizabeth Girosohdh watched her 8-month old twins fight over her breast milk. The 45-year-old lost her crops during fighting in her village of Verteth in June. One of the twins is severely malnourished.

"Sometimes I try to breastfeed but I can't and the kids cry and cry all night," she said. "If there's not enough food, I worry I could lose them."

2 months after hurricanes, Louisiana residents still hurting

By REBECCA SANTANA Associated Press

LAKE CHARLES, La. (AP) — As southwest Louisiana recovers from the back-to-back hurricanes that hammered the region this year, signs of progress compete with lingering evidence of mass destruction. The fallen trees that carpeted neighborhoods have mostly been chopped up and hauled away, but the roofs they devoured are still covered in blue tarps. Piles of debris still line the roads.

Brandy Monticello is thankful for the progress. She and her wife no longer have to go to the Civic Center just to get basics like drinking water or ice. But during her daily 45-minute commute from the trailer the family is living in to the hospital where she works as a respiratory therapist, she sees how much still needs to be done. Every day, another house demolished. So many tarps on those still standing.

"It's almost overwhelming by the time you get home," she said. "You do have to cry every once in a

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while just to let some emotions out.”

In a year dominated by the coronavirus pandemic, a deeply divisive election and a national reckoning on race, some worry that the hurricanes and their destruction have not gotten the kind of attention that normally leads to an outpouring of support.

Aid efforts after Laura and Delta have only garnered about 25% of the volunteers and donations as other storms affecting the region, such as 2005's Hurricane Rita, said Denise Durel, president and CEO of the United Way of Southwest Louisiana.

Hurricane Laura roared ashore in southwestern Louisiana on Aug. 27 as a Category 4 storm just south of Lake Charles. On Oct. 9, recovering residents watched as Category 2 Delta swept in just a few miles away. What didn't get scoured by Laura's winds was swamped by Delta's rains. Delta also ripped off the tarps that had gone up on roofs after Laura.

According to Louisiana government figures, nearly 47,000 homes were damaged by Hurricane Laura, with about 16,000 of those in need of major repairs. The bulk of those homes are in Calcasieu Parish, home to the state's fifth-largest city, Lake Charles, with 80,000 residents. In the less-populated Cameron Parish on the Gulf of Mexico, many homes were simply erased by Laura.

Initial estimates from disaster modeling firm Karen Clark & Co. put the combined insured U.S. losses from Laura and Delta at nearly \$10 billion.

“The first one was a big blow. The second one just was an insult,” Monticello said. In the early weeks after the first hurricane, she, her spouse, and three sons lived all together in the living room. They realized just how damaged the house was when Delta arrived and water started streaming in.

The Monticellos have since reached into their savings to buy a trailer and a truck to haul it so they have someplace to live while their house is being rebuilt.

There is a scarcity of just about everything: good contractors, storage containers, affordable apartments, staff for the businesses that are open. A Facebook group set up after Hurricane Laura has become a lifeline for struggling residents. A recent posting asked for advice on keeping campers warm in winter or keeping mice out of trailers. Another posting asked the question, “What does everyone need,” prompting a stream of answers such as, “Drywalling lessons and classes on how to handle an insurance claim” or “HOPE. Hope that things will get better.”

Wilfred Trahan remembers driving home for the first time after Laura and seeing every telephone pole for miles snapped at the base. Roof after roof smashed. Like many homes, his two-story house looked OK from the outside but told a different story inside. His chimney had smashed through the roof and he estimated he lost about 80% of his shingles, leading to extensive water damage. The house had to be gutted.

Now he commutes back and forth from Lafayette, about 75 miles (121 kilometers) away, where he and his wife are living in a hotel. Sometimes he stays overnight with family or friends whose houses survived. On a recent day, he arrived at his property at 6 a.m. only to find that the contractor who was supposed to meet him there was a no-show. He counts himself lucky because he has a fence — albeit a damaged, lopsided one — surrounding his backyard. That means he can put supplies there and they don't get stolen overnight.

“Everybody's fighting for the same contractors,” he said. “It's been crazy.”

The biggest shortage is housing. Many residents are still living in hotels in Texas or other parts of Louisiana and commuting into town to oversee their rebuilding or entrusting the work to contractors from afar. Residents have bought trailers and parked them in their driveways. Others sleep in tents.

That's what happened to Cristin Trahan and her family. Having weathered Laura in a house south of Lake Charles, she struggled to hold her emotions in check in front of her kids when she saw what had happened to her mobile home.

“It was several, several feet over, upside down, smashed,” she said.

Cristin's son, fiancé and 1-year-old son are now staying in a trailer that volunteers gave them. Trahan said she didn't want to take her family and the family's dogs to a shelter, and looters have gone through their possessions, so the family decided to remain on the property.

They've struggled to keep the rain out of their tent. Trahan, who works at Chick-fil-A, washes her uniform

and dries it by the warmth of a propane heater and a fan in her tent. She said she is constantly aware of the things that she used to take for granted before Laura, such as being able to wash dishes in hot water so the grease actually comes off instead of cold water from an outside hose.

Brandy and Christy Monticello struggled with the decision: Stay or go? Finally, even after others had picked up, sold everything and left, they decided to stay put. It's still their home, after all.

The sound of workers nailing in their new roof on a recent Saturday morning was a sign of progress.

"It's not our normal and we don't know what normal is, but you know what? We're doing it. And that's all we can do," she said.

Associated Press Photographer Gerald Herbert contributed to this report.

Follow Santana on Twitter @ruskygal.

The autopsy, a fading practice, revealed secrets of COVID-19

By MARION RENAULT Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The COVID-19 pandemic has helped revive the autopsy.

When the virus first arrived in U.S. hospitals, doctors could only guess what was causing its strange constellation of symptoms: What could explain why patients were losing their sense of smell and taste, developing skin rashes, struggling to breathe and reporting memory loss on top of flu-like coughs and aches?

At hospital morgues, which have been steadily losing prominence and funding over several decades, pathologists were busily dissecting the disease's first victims — and finding some answers.

"We were getting emails from clinicians, kind of desperate, asking, 'What are you seeing?'" said NYU Langone's Dr. Amy Rapkiewicz. 'Autopsy,' she pointed out, means to see for yourself. "That's exactly what we had to do."

Early autopsies of deceased patients confirmed the coronavirus does not just cause respiratory disease, but can also attack other vital organs. They also led doctors to try blood thinners in some COVID-19 patients and reconsider how long others should be on ventilators.

"You can't treat what you don't know about," said Dr. Alex Williamson, a pathologist at Northwell Health in New York. "Many lives have been saved by looking closely at someone's death."

Autopsies have informed medicine for centuries — most recently helping to reveal the extent of the opioid epidemic, improve cancer care and demystify AIDS and anthrax. Hospitals were once judged by how many autopsies they performed.

But they've lost stature over the years as the medical world instead turned to lab tests and imaging scans. In 1950, the practice was conducted on about half of deceased hospital patients. Today, those rates have shrunk to somewhere between 5% and 11%.

"It's really kind of a lost tool," said Louisiana State University pathologist Dr. Richard Vander Heide.

Some hospitals found it even harder this year. Safety concerns about transmission forced many hospital administrators to stop or seriously curb autopsies in 2020. The pandemic also led to a general dip in the total number patients at many hospitals, which drove down autopsy rates in some places. Large hospitals around the country have reported conducting fewer autopsies in 2020.

"Overall, our numbers are down, pretty significantly," from 270 autopsies in recent years to about 200 so far this year, said Dr. Allecia Wilson, director of autopsies and forensic services at Michigan Medicine in Ann Arbor.

At the University of Washington in Seattle, pathologist Dr. Desiree Marshall couldn't conduct COVID-19 autopsies in her usual suite because, as one of the hospital's oldest facilities, it lacks the proper ventilation to safely conduct the procedure. Marshall ended up borrowing the county medical examiner offices for a few cases early on, and has been working out of the school's animal research facilities since April.

Other hospitals went the opposite way, performing far more autopsies even under difficult circumstances to try to better understand the pandemic and keep up with a surge of deaths that has resulted in at least

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400,000 more U.S. deaths than normal.

At New Orleans University Medical Center, where Vander Heide works, pathologists have performed about 50% more autopsies than they have in recent years. Other hospitals in Alabama, California, Tennessee, New York and Virginia say they'll also surpass their usual annual tally for the procedure.

Their results have shaped our understanding of what COVID-19 does to the body and how we might combat it.

In spring and early summer, for example, some seriously sick coronavirus patients were on ventilators for weeks at a time. Later, pathologists discovered such extended ventilation could cause extensive lung injury, leading doctors to rethink how they use ventilators during the pandemic.

Doctors are now exploring whether blood thinners can prevent microscopic blood clots that had been discovered in patients early in the pandemic.

Autopsy studies also indicated the virus may travel through the blood stream or hitch a ride on infected cells, spreading to and impacting a person's blood vessels, heart, brain, liver, kidneys and colon. This finding helped explain the virus's wide range of symptoms.

More findings are sure to come: Pathologists have stocked freezers with coronavirus-infected organs and tissues collected during autopsies, which will help researchers study the disease as well as possible cures and treatments. Future autopsies will also help them understand the disease's toll on long haulers, those who suffer symptoms for weeks or months after infection.

Despite these life-saving discoveries being made during the pandemic, financial realities and a dwindling workforce mean it's unlikely that the ancient medical practice will fully rebound when the outbreak wanes.

Hospitals are not required to provide autopsy services, and in those that do perform them, the procedure's costs are not directly covered by most private insurance or by Medicare.

"When you consider there's no reimbursement for this, it's almost an altruistic practice," said Rutgers University pathologist Dr. Billie Fyfe-Kirschner. "It's vitally important but we don't have to fund it."

Added into the mix: The number of experts who can actually perform autopsies is critically low. Estimates suggest the U.S. has only a few hundred forensic pathologists but could use several thousand — and less than one in 100 graduating medical school students enters the profession each year.

Some in the field hope the 2020 pandemic could boost recruitment to the field — just like the "CSI boom" of the early 2000s, Northwell's Williamson said.

Michigan Medicine's Wilson is more skeptical, but even still she can't imagine her work becoming totally obsolete. Learning from the dead to treat the living — it's a pillar of medicine, she said.

It helped doctors understand the mysteries of 1918's influenza pandemic, just as it is now helping them understand the mysteries of COVID-19 more than a century later.

"They were in the same situation," Vander Heide said of the doctors trying to save lives in 1918. "The only way to learn what was going on was to open up the body and see."

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Nurses fear what's to come: 'Walk down our unit for a day'

By STEFANIE DAZIO Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — The nurses of California are afraid.

It's Christmas Eve, and they aren't home with their families. They are working, always working, completely gowned up — and worn down.

They're frightened by what people are doing, or not doing, during a coronavirus pandemic that has already killed more than 320,000 nationwide and shows no signs of slowing down.

They're even more terrified of what's next.

"Every day, I look into the eyes of someone who is struggling to breathe," said nurse Jenny Carrillo, her voice breaking.

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A charge nurse at Providence Holy Cross Medical Center in Los Angeles' San Fernando Valley, Carrillo is haunted by the daily counts of COVID-19 patients. Dark shadows circle her eyes.

By Tuesday evening, the hospital had 147 coronavirus patients — a record for Holy Cross but a tiny fraction of the nearly 2 million cases recorded in California since the pandemic began.

Close to 18,000 people were hospitalized in the state Tuesday, and models project the number could top 100,000 in a month — unimaginable for medical systems that are already running out of room. More than 23,000 people with COVID-19 have died in California, and the number is only expected to climb.

Dr. Jim Keany, associate director of Mission Hospital's emergency department in Southern California's Orange County, wonders how much more they can handle.

"Are we going to have the resources to take care of our community?" he said.

The first COVID-19 case in California was confirmed Jan. 25. It took 292 days to get to 1 million infections on Nov. 11.

Just 44 days later, the number was closing in on 2 million.

On Tuesday, Holy Cross had 147 coronavirus patients across its 377 beds, more than double the record seen at the hospital in the first wave of the pandemic earlier this year.

"If you had told us in April that we'd have 147 patients?" said Elizabeth Chow, Holy Cross' executive director of critical care and a nurse leader. "Never in my wildest dreams."

And the nightmare is expected to get worse.

Despite health officials' pleas that people stay home, millions of Americans are traveling ahead of Christmas and New Year's, much like they did last month for Thanksgiving.

Hospitals in California — and elsewhere — already have been pushed to the brink. They have hired extra staff, canceled elective surgeries and set up outdoor tents to treat patients, all to boost capacity before the cases contracted over Christmas and New Year's show up in the next few weeks.

Holy Cross and Mission Hospital have sprinkled holiday decorations throughout the hallways: poinsettias perched on counters, scraggly miniature trees in patients' rooms, caricatures of the Grinch doodled at nurses' stations.

But the bright colors don't distract from the constant cacophony: ventilators belching like foghorns, monitors beeping, machines whirring — all trying to keep even one more person from adding to the death toll.

Still, there are hopeful moments.

On Monday, Mission Hospital celebrated a milestone: 100 patients who had been in the isolation intensive care unit — reserved for the sickest of the sick — have survived and gone home.

In Holy Cross, "Here Comes the Sun" by the Beatles plays throughout the hospital when a COVID-19 patient is discharged.

The new pandemic tradition has happier roots — hospitals often sound a lullaby each time a baby is born.

It's a few seconds of respite, but it's not enough. For every patient who goes home, more are admitted.

Holy Cross charge nurse Melanie LaMadrid tends to her patients in 12-hour shifts, holding their hands in her purple gloves.

"It's all we can do," she said. "Watching them suffer is hard."

These nurses are not only exhausted, they are angry with those who flout pleas to stay home, stay safe.

"It's not some selfish person who doesn't want to wear a mask," Carrillo said. "I wish they could just walk down our unit for a day and look at the faces of some of these patients."

You can be our messengers, nurse Genyza Dawson tells her patients when — or if — they get discharged. Dawson, who has a scar forming on her nose from the tight masks, begs them to spread the word.

"Now you know how it is," she tells them. "You were one of the lucky ones."

Trump threatens COVID relief bill, testing loyalty of GOP

By LISA MASCARO, KEVIN FREKING and ANDREW TAYLOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Threatening to tank Congress' massive COVID relief and government funding package, President Donald Trump's demand for bigger aid checks for Americans is forcing Republicans

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traditionally wary of such spending into an uncomfortable test of allegiance.

On Thursday, House Democrats who also favor \$2,000 checks will all but dare Republicans to break with Trump, calling up his proposal for a Christmas Eve vote. The president's last-minute objection could derail critical legislation amid a raging pandemic and deep economic uncertainty. His attacks risk a federal government shutdown by early next week.

"Just when you think you have seen it all," House Speaker Nancy Pelosi wrote Wednesday in a letter to colleagues.

"The entire country knows that it is urgent for the President to sign this bill, both to provide the coronavirus relief and to keep government open."

Republicans led by Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell have resisted \$2,000 checks as too costly. House Republicans are expected to block the vote, but Democrats may try again Monday.

The president's last-minute objections are setting up a defining showdown with his own Republican Party in his final days in office.

Rather than take the victory of the sweeping aid package, among the biggest in history, Trump is lashing out at GOP leaders over the presidential election — for acknowledging Joe Biden as president-elect and rebuffing his campaign to dispute the Electoral College results when they are tallied in Congress on Jan. 6.

The president's push to increase direct payments for most Americans from \$600 to \$2,000 for individuals and \$4,000 for couples splits the party with a politically painful loyalty test, including for GOP senators David Perdue and Kelly Loeffler, fighting to retain their seats in the Jan. 5 special election in Georgia.

Republican lawmakers traditionally balk at big spending and many never fully embraced Trump's populist approach. Their political DNA tells them to oppose a costlier relief package. But now they're being asked to stand with the president.

GOP leaders were mostly silent Wednesday, with neither McConnell nor Rep. Kevin McCarthy, the House minority leader, speaking publicly.

On a conference call, House Republican lawmakers complained that Trump threw them under the bus, according to one Republican on the private call and granted anonymity to discuss it. Most had voted for the package and they urged leaders to hit the cable news shows to explain its benefits, the person said.

McCarthy later sent a letter to colleagues suggesting Republicans would offer their own proposal, picking up on Trump's own complaints about foreign aid to "reexamine how our tax dollars are spent overseas."

Democrats were taking advantage of the Republican disarray to apply pressure for a priority. Jon Ossoff, Perdue's Democratic opponent, tweeted simply on Tuesday night: "\$2,000 checks now."

As Congress left town for the holidays, the year-end package was part of a hard-fought compromise, a massive 5,000-plus page bill that includes the COVID aid and \$1.4 trillion to fund government agencies through September and address other priorities.

The relief bill Trump is criticizing would establish a temporary \$300 per week supplemental jobless benefit, along with a new round of subsidies for hard-hit businesses, restaurants and theaters and money for schools, health care providers and renters facing eviction.

Even though Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin represented the White House in negotiations, Trump assailed the bipartisan effort in a video he tweeted out Tuesday night, suggesting he may not sign the legislation.

Railing against a range of provisions in the broader government funding package, including foreign aid mainstays included each year, Trump called the bill a "disgrace."

Trump did not specifically vow to use his veto power, and there may be enough support in Congress to override him if he does. But the consequences would be severe if Trump upends the legislation. It would mean no federal aid to struggling Americans and small businesses, and no additional resources to help with vaccine distribution. To top it off, because lawmakers linked the pandemic relief bill to an overarching funding measure, the government would shut down on Dec. 29.

The final text of the more than 5,000-page bill was still being prepared by Congress and was not expected to be sent to the White House for Trump's signature before Thursday or Friday, an aide said.

That complicates the schedule ahead. If Trump vetoes the package, or allows it to expire with a "pocket

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veto" at the end of the year, Americans will go without massive amounts of COVID aid.

A resolution could be forced Monday. That's when a stopgap funding bill Congress approved to keep the government funded while the paperwork was being compiled expires, risking a federal shutdown.

Democrats are considering another stopgap measure to at least keep government running until Biden is sworn into office Jan. 20, according to two aides granted anonymity to discuss the private talks.

The House was already set to return Monday, and the Senate Tuesday, for a vote to override Trump's veto of the must-pass defense bill. Democrats may try again at that time to pass Trump's proposal for \$2,000 checks, as well as the temporary government funding measure to avert a shutdown, the aides said.

The push for bigger payments to Americans drew rare common cause between Trump and some of the most liberal members of Congress. Pelosi and Democrats said they fought for the higher stipends during protracted negotiations only to settle on the lower number when Republicans refused.

Pelosi is set to offer the president's proposal Thursday under a procedure that allows just one lawmaker to object to its consideration. It will be pushed forward during a so-called pro forma session, with few lawmakers expected to attend. McCarthy and Republicans are poised to object.

Republicans have been reluctant to spend more on pandemic relief and only agreed to the big year-end package as time dwindled for a final deal. Sen. Chuck Schumer, the Senate Democratic leader, said that "Trump needs to sign the bill to help people and keep the government open," and Congress would step up for more aid after.

The Senate cleared the huge relief package by a 92-6 vote after the House approved it by 359-53. Those votes totals would be enough to override a veto should Trump decide to take that step.

Biden applauded lawmakers for their work. He described the package as far from perfect, "but it does provide vital relief at a critical time."

He also said more relief would be needed in the months ahead.

OKC-Houston game postponed, Harden out after COVID violation

By KRISTIE RIEKEN AP Sports Writer

HOUSTON (AP) — The James Harden soap opera in Houston now comes with a canceled season opener — and a \$50,000 fine for the league's leading scorer.

Houston's opener against the Oklahoma City Thunder on Wednesday night was scrapped after coronavirus cases and Harden's violation of the NBA's COVID-19 protocols left the Rockets without the league-mandated eight players available to start a game.

It was a dispiriting blow to the NBA on just the second night of an uncertain season launching with the pandemic still raging.

The NBA announced the postponement in a release that said three Rockets players had returned tests that were either positive or inconclusive and that four other players were quarantined because of contact tracing.

The release also said that Harden was unavailable for the game because of a violation of health and safety protocols after video of the disgruntled star surfaced on social media where he was without a mask at a crowded party in a private event space Monday night.

The league later announced the fine for Harden, saying the protocols prohibit attending indoor social gatherings of 15 or more people or entering bars, lounges, clubs or similar establishments.

Already a distraction to the team amid months of rumors that he wants to be traded, Harden's latest move potentially threatened the health and safety of his team and kept the Rockets from beginning their season.

The drama began when reports surfaced that Harden and Russell Westbrook both wanted out of Houston. The Rockets dealt Westbrook to the Wizards earlier this month after just one disappointing season in exchange for John Wall and a future first-round pick.

That move did nothing to quell the reports that Harden still wanted to be traded, and the scrutiny only intensified when the 2018 MVP didn't report to camp on time. While the rest of the Rockets were prepar-

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ing for the season, Harden was photographed partying in Atlanta at a rapper's birthday party and at a nightclub in Las Vegas.

He finally arrived in Houston but missed the team's first two preseason games under new coach Stephen Silas while going through the league's COVID-19 testing protocol. Harden rejoined a team that looked quite a bit different than the one which lost to the Lakers in the Western Conference semifinals this summer.

Houston has 16 players on its roster; with seven dealing with tests or quarantine and one hurt. That would have left eight eligible players, which is the league minimum to start a game. Harden's unavailability lowered Houston's total of available players to seven.

Houston's injury report released Wednesday morning that Ben McLemore and rookie KJ Martin were not with the team and were self-isolating and that DeMarcus Cousins was questionable because of a sprained right ankle.

Harden's since-deleted Instagram post explaining why he attended the event in question would certainly suggest that he was in violation of the rules.

In the post he wrote: "One thing after another. I went to show love to my homegirl at her event (not a strip club) because she is becoming a boss and putting her people in a position of success and now it's a problem. Everyday it's something different. No matter how many times people try to drag my name under you can't. The real people always end up on top."

But for now the eight-time All-Star is on the shelf after admitting to breaking the rules set forth in the protocols.

"In light of the serious and highly infectious nature of the coronavirus... individuals must not engage in activities or conduct that a reasonable person would regard as posing unnecessary risk relative to the significance (or lack thereof) of such activity or conduct," the protocols say.

Harden, according to the protocols, may now be ordered into quarantine and could lose more than \$500,000 for each game missed because of protocol violations.

Houston's next scheduled game is Saturday at Portland and the road trip continues on Monday in Denver. They're next scheduled to play at home on New Year's Eve in one of two straight games against Sacramento. Houston is one of only six teams allowing fans to start the season and it will be interesting to see how the home crowd responds to Harden if he's available to play next Thursday.

After finishing last season in the bubble, the NBA is now dealing with more coronavirus issues as all its teams are playing in their own arenas. Sacramento coach Luke Walton used what happened in Houston as a chance to remind his players to be vigilant about following protocols, and Nuggets coach Michael Malone said he expects more such issues as the season gets going.

"Not surprised. Just look at what's going on in our country, around the world. COVID is a lot bigger than the NBA," he said. "... This is something that we've been dealing with since the season was shut down last year. We were forced to play in a bubble and now we're trying to play outside a bubble and these are some of the side effects of that. ... That will not be the last game that's postponed due to COVID."

Oklahoma City also was involved in the March 11 game that led to the league shutting down for the coronavirus pandemic; the Thunder were to have been the home team that night for a game against Utah, called off when it was learned Jazz center Rudy Gobert was the NBA's first player to test positive for COVID-19.

The Thunder, unwittingly, now find themselves part of history again.

AP Basketball Writer Tim Reynolds and AP Sports Writer Arnie Stapleton contributed to this report.

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

Tony-nominated Broadway star Rebecca Luker dies at 59

By MARK KENNEDY AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Soprano Rebecca Luker, a three-time Tony nominated actor who starred in some

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of the biggest Broadway hits of the past three decades, died Wednesday. She was 59.

Her death was announced by her husband, veteran Broadway actor Danny Burstein, who said in a statement "our family is devastated. I have no words at this moment because I'm numb." Luker went public in 2020 saying she had been diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease, also called ALS, or amyotrophic lateral sclerosis.

Luker was a best actress Tony nominee in 1995 playing Magnolia in "Showboat," a best actress nominee in 2000 for playing Marian in "The Music Man" opposite Craig Bierko, and a best featured actress nominee in 2007 as Winifred Banks in "Mary Poppins."

Tributes flooded social media, including from Broadway stars like Laura Benanti, who called Luker "humble, loving and kind" with a "golden voice" that would "wrap you in peace." Seth Rudetsky said it was "a great loss for Broadway and the world." Kristin Chenoweth tweeted that Luker was "one of the main reasons I wanted to be a soprano" and Bernadette Peters called her "one of the most beautiful voices on Broadway and a lovely person."

Luker was known for staying with shows for extended runs. "Yes, I'm the queen of long runs," she told the Connecticut Post in 2011. "I don't know if I'm lucky or if it's a curse. But it's just how things have happened for me and it is mostly a good thing."

In 2013 she appeared in an off-Broadway revival of Stephen Sondheim's "Passion." In addition to many stage credits, Luker appeared on TV in "Boardwalk Empire" and "The Good Wife" and in the 2012 film "Not Fade Away." Her other off-Broadway credits include "Death Takes a Holiday," "Indian Blood" and "The Vagina Monologues."

Broadway stars Stephanie J. Block called Luker an "angel-faced and angel-spirited" and LaChanze took to Twitter to call Luker's death "a huge loss for the American theater." Tony-winner Michael Cerveris said: "There was no one more humble, more unexpectedly funny or more glorious when she sang."

Luker and her husband starred in an episode of "Law & Order: Special Victims Unit," in which they played the parents of a transgender youngster killed in an accident after being bullied.

Luker was born and raised in Birmingham, Alabama, and received a bachelor's in music from the University of Montevallo, where she later was awarded an honorary doctorate.

Luker made her Broadway debut in 1988 in "The Phantom of the Opera" first as an understudy to Sarah Brightman and then playing Christine opposite the legendary Michael Crawford. "I'll never forget it. It was an out-of-body experience. He was so kind, though, and I'll never forget that," she told Playbill in 2016.

She had Broadway roles in the "The Sound of Music" and as the original Lily in "The Secret Garden." She was a replacement in "Nine" in 2003 opposite Antonio Banderas, "Fun Home" in 2016 and in "Rodgers + Hammerstein's Cinderella" in 2013-14.

Her albums include "Greenwich Time," "Leaving Home," "Anything Goes: Rebecca Luker Sings Cole Porter" and "I Got Love: Songs of Jerome Kern," featuring 14 classics ranging from "Bill/Can't Help Loving That Man" to "My Husband's First Wife." She also paid tribute to the legendary Barbara Cook at the 2011 Kennedy Center Honors.

Her final stage role was playing a small-town minister's narrow-minded wife in a 2019 Kennedy Center production of "Footloose." Her last performance was in June in a Zoom benefit performance, "At Home With Rebecca Luker."

In addition to her husband, Luker is survived by two stepsons, Alex and Zach.

Mark Kennedy is at <http://twitter.com/KennedyTwits>

New round of Trump clemency benefits Manafort, other allies

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump on Wednesday pardoned more than two dozen people, including former campaign chairman Paul Manafort and Charles Kushner, the father of his son-in-law, in the latest wave of clemency to benefit longtime associates and supporters.

The actions, in Trump's final weeks at the White House, bring to nearly 50 the number of people whom

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the president has granted clemency in the last week. The list from the last two days includes not only multiple people convicted in the investigation into the Trump campaign's ties to Russia but also allies from Congress and other felons whose causes were championed by friends.

Pardons are common in the final stretch of a president's tenure, the recipients largely dependent on the individual whims of the nation's chief executive. Trump throughout his administration has shucked aside the conventions of the Obama administration, when pardons were largely reserved for drug offenders not known to the general public, and instead bestowed clemency on high-profile contacts and associates who were key figures in an investigation that directly concerned him.

Even members of the president's own party raised eyebrows, with Republican Sen. Ben Sasse of Nebraska issuing a brief statement that said: "This is rotten to the core."

The pardons Wednesday of Manafort and Roger Stone, who months earlier had his sentence commuted by Trump, were particularly notable, underscoring the president's desire to chip away at the results and legacy of special counsel Robert Mueller's Russia investigation. He has now pardoned four people convicted in that investigation, including former national security adviser Michael Flynn and campaign adviser George Papadopoulos, who pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI.

"The pardons from this President are what you would expect to get if you gave the pardon power to a mob boss," tweeted Andrew Weissmann, a Mueller team member who helped prosecute Manafort.

Manafort, who led Trump's campaign during a pivotal period in 2016 before being ousted over his ties to Ukraine, was among the first people charged as part of Mueller's investigation into ties between the Trump campaign and Russia. He was later sentenced to more than seven years in prison for financial crimes related to his political consulting work in Ukraine, but was released to home confinement last spring because of coronavirus concerns in the federal prison system.

Though the charges against Manafort did not concern the central thrust of Mueller's mandate — whether the Trump campaign and Russia colluded to tip the election — he was nonetheless a pivotal figure in the investigation.

His close relationship to a man U.S. officials have linked to Russian intelligence, and with whom he shared internal campaign polling data, attracted particular scrutiny during the investigation, though Mueller never charged Manafort or any other Trump associate with conspiring with Russia.

Manafort, in a series of tweets, thanked Trump and lavished praise on the outgoing president, declaring that history would show he had accomplished more than any of his predecessors.

Trump did not pardon Manafort's deputy, Rick Gates, who was sentenced last year to 45 days in prison after extensively cooperating with prosecutors, or former Trump lawyer Michael Cohen, who pleaded guilty to campaign finance crimes related to his efforts to buy the silence of women who said they had sexual relationships with Trump. Both were also convicted in the Mueller probe.

New York City prosecutors, meanwhile, have been seeking to have the state's highest court revive state mortgage fraud charges against Manafort after a lower court dismissed them on double jeopardy grounds. A spokesman for District Attorney Cy Vance said the pardon "underscores the urgent need to hold Mr. Manafort accountable for his crimes against the People of New York."

Manafort and Stone are hardly conventional pardon recipients, in part because both were scolded by judges for effectively thumbing their nose at the criminal justice system as their cases were pending. Manafort was accused of witness tampering even after he was indicted and was accused by prosecutors of lying while trying to earn credit for cooperation.

Stone, who was convicted of lying to Congress about his efforts to gain inside information about the release by WikiLeaks of Russia-hacked Democratic emails during the 2016 campaign, was similarly censured by a judge because of his social media posts.

In a statement Wednesday, Stone thanked Trump and alleged that he had been subjected to a "Soviet-style show trial on politically-motivated charges"

Kushner is the father of Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, and a wealthy real estate executive who pleaded guilty years ago to tax evasion and making illegal campaign donations. Trump and the elder Kushner knew each other from real estate circles and their children were married in 2009.

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Prosecutors allege that after Kushner discovered that his brother-in-law was cooperating with authorities, he hatched a revenge and intimidation scheme. They say he hired a prostitute to lure his brother-in-law, then arranged to have a secret recording of the encounter in a New Jersey motel room sent to his own sister, the man's wife.

Former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie has called it "one of the most loathsome, disgusting crimes" he ever prosecuted as U.S. attorney.

Trump's legally troubled allies were not the only recipients of clemency. The list of 29 recipients included people whose pleas for forgiveness have been promoted by people supporting the president throughout his term in office, among them former Florida Attorney General Pam Bondi, Newsmax CEO Christopher Ruddy and Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky.

One recipient was Topeka Sam, whose case was promoted by Alice Johnson, a criminal justice advocate whom Trump pardoned and who appeared in a Super Bowl ad for him and at the Republican National Convention.

"Ms. Sam's life is a story of redemption," the White House said in its release, praising her for helping other women in need.

Others granted clemency included a former county commissioner in Florida who was convicted of taking gifts from people doing business with the county and a community leader in Kentucky who was convicted of federal drug offenses.

Associated Press writers Jill Colvin in Palm Beach, Florida, and Michael Balsamo in Washington contributed to this report.

Pardons in killings of Iraqi civilians stir angry response

By ERIC TUCKER and ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The courtroom monitors carried the image of a smiling 9-year-old boy as his father pleaded for the punishment of four U.S. government contractors convicted in shootings that killed that child and more than a dozen other Iraqi civilians.

"What's the difference," Mohammad Kinani al-Razzaq asked a Washington judge at an emotional 2015 sentencing hearing, "between these criminals and terrorists?"

The shootings of civilians by Blackwater employees at a crowded Baghdad traffic circle in September 2007 prompted an international outcry, left a reputational black eye on U.S. operations at the height of the Iraq war and put the government on the defensive over its use of private contractors in military zones. The resulting criminal prosecutions spanned years in Washington but came to an abrupt end Tuesday when President Donald Trump pardoned the convicted contractors, an act that human rights activists and some Iraqis decried as a miscarriage of justice.

The news comes at a delicate moment for the Iraqi leadership, which is trying to balance growing calls by some Iraqi factions for a complete U.S. troop withdrawal from Iraq with what they see as the need for a more gradual drawdown.

"The infamous Blackwater company killed Iraqi citizens at Nisoor Square. Today we heard they were released upon personal order by President Trump, as if they don't care for the spilled Iraqi blood," said Saleh Abed, a Baghdad resident walking in the square.

The United Nations' Human Rights office said Wednesday that it was "deeply concerned" by the pardons, which it said "contributes to impunity and has the effect of emboldening others to commit such crimes in the future." The Iraqi Foreign Ministry said the pardons "did not take into account the seriousness of the crime committed," and that it would urge the U.S. to reconsider.

Al-Razzaq, the father of the slain boy, told the BBC that the pardon decision "broke my life again."

Lawyers for the contractors, who had aggressively defended the men for more than a decade, offered a different take.

They have long asserted that the shooting began only after the men were ambushed by gunfire from

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insurgents and then shot back in defense. They have pointed to problems with the prosecution — the first indictment was dismissed by a judge — and argued that the trial that ended with their convictions was tainted by false testimony and withheld evidence.

“Paul Slough and his colleagues didn’t deserve to spend one minute in prison,” said Brian Heberlig, a lawyer for one of the four pardoned defendants. “I am overwhelmed with emotion at this fantastic news.”

Though the circumstances of the shooting have long been contested, there is no question the Sept. 16, 2007, episode — which began after the contractors were ordered to create a safe evacuation route after a car bomb explosion — was a low point for U.S.-Iraqi relations, coming just years after the Abu Ghraib torture scandal.

The FBI and Congress opened investigations, and the State Department — which used the Blackwater firm to provide security for diplomats — ordered a review of practices. The guards would later be charged in the deaths of 14 civilians, including women and children, in what U.S. prosecutors said was a wild, unprovoked attack by sniper fire, machine guns and grenade launchers against unarmed Iraqis.

Robert Ford, who served as a U.S. diplomat in Iraq over five years, met with the widows and other relatives of the victims after the killings, handing out envelopes of money in compensation and formal U.S. apologies — though without admitting guilt since investigations were ongoing.

“It was one of the very worst occasions I can remember in my time” in Iraq, said Ford, who teaches at Yale University. “That was just horrible. We had killed these people’s relatives and they were still terribly grieving.”

The widows mostly took the envelopes silently. Some of the adult male relatives of those killed spoke up, bitterly. “How could you do this? We must have justice,” Ford recounted in an interview Wednesday.

Adding to the angry fallout among Iraqis was the involvement of Blackwater, a security firm founded by Erik Prince, a former Navy SEAL who is a Trump ally and brother of Education Secretary Betsy DeVos. The company had already developed an unfavorable reputation for acting with impunity, its guards frequently accused of firing shots at the slightest pretext, including to clear their way in traffic.

A review of Blackwater’s own incident reports in 2007 by House Democrats found Blackwater contractors reported they engaged in 195 “escalation of force” shootings over the preceding two years — with Blackwater reporting its guards shooting first more than 80% of the time.

The 2007 killings in the Baghdad traffic circle were among many attacks, large and small, hitting civilians that served to turn even some initial Iraqi supporters of Saddam Hussein’s overthrow against Americans. In 2005, for instance, Marines were accused of killing 24 unarmed men, women and children in the western town of Haditha in anger over a car bomb attack. U.S. military prosecutions in those killings ended with no jail sentences.

The case against the Blackwater guards ping-ponged across courts in Washington, with a federal appeals court at one point overturning the first-degree murder conviction of one defendant, Nicholas Slatten, and sharply reducing the prison sentences of the three others. All four were in prison when the pardons were issued.

The guards defiantly asserted their innocence at their 2015 sentencing hearing, with Slough stating that he felt “utterly betrayed by the same government I served honorably.” Another defendant, Dustin Heard, said he could “not say in all honesty to the court that I did anything wrong.”

The judge rejected that characterization, saying the “overall wild thing that went on here just cannot ever be condoned by the court.”

Besides the legal impact, there could potentially be diplomatic and strategic consequences as well as Iraq assesses the U.S. military presence there.

In Iraq, said Ford, the former diplomat, the pardons will “necessarily give some ammunition to those who say get the Americans out now.”

Associated Press writer Samya Kullab in Baghdad contributed to this report.

Edging into Christmas Eve, EU and UK near Brexit trade deal

By RAF CASERT and JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — European Union and British negotiators inched their way to within touching distance of a trade deal early Thursday, raising hopes a chaotic economic break between the two sides on New Year's Day could be averted, officials said.

After resolving a few remaining fair-competition issues, negotiators tussled over EU fishing rights in U.K. waters as they worked right into Christmas Eve to secure a provisional deal for a post-Brexit relationship after nine months of talks.

Sources on both sides said the long and difficult negotiations were in their final stretch as negotiators went into another night, living off a stack of pizzas delivered to EU headquarters while they were combing through the fine print of a draft deal that runs to some 2,000 pages.

"Work will continue throughout the night," said EU spokesman Eric Mamer.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson held a Cabinet conference call to brief his senior ministers on the outlines of the deal, ahead of an announcement widely expected later Thursday.

Johnson and EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen are likely to bring news of an agreement before the tentative deal goes to the 27 EU capitals seeking unanimous approval and the blessing of the EU and British parliaments.

No matter what happens, trade between Britain and the EU will face customs checks and some other barriers on Jan. 1, when the U.K. leaves the bloc's single market and customs union. A trade deal would avert the imposition of tariffs and duties that could cost both sides billions in trade and hundreds of thousands of jobs. Britain withdrew from the EU on Jan. 31, and an economic transition period expires on Dec. 31.

Johnson has always insisted the U.K. will "prosper mightily" even if no deal is reached and the U.K. has to trade with the EU on World Trade Organization terms from Jan. 1.

But his government has acknowledged that a chaotic exit is likely to bring gridlock at Britain's ports, temporary shortages of some goods and price increases for staple foods. Tariffs will be applied to many U.K. exports, including 10% on cars and more than 40% on lamb, battering the U.K. economy as it struggles to rebound from the impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

Over the past few days, Johnson and von der Leyen have been drawn more and more into the talks and have been in contact by phone seeking to unblock negotiations.

Rumors of a pre-Christmas trade deal surfaced in recent days based on progress on the main outstanding issues, other than fishing.

The EU has long feared that Britain would undercut the bloc's social, environmental and state aid rules to be able to gain an unfair edge with its exports to the EU. Britain has said that having to meet EU rules would undercut its sovereignty. On those issues, a compromise had been reached, a diplomat from an EU country said.

The economically minor but hugely symbolic issue of fish came to be the final sticking point, with maritime EU nations seeking to retain access to U.K. waters where they have long fished, and Britain insisting it must exercise control as an "independent coastal state,"

Some EU nations insisted that upon close scrutiny, Britain's latest proposals on quotas for EU vessels in U.K. waters were far less conciliatory than first met the eye, imperiling a deal at the last minute.

On Wednesday, brokering on quotas and transition times for EU vessels to continue fishing in U.K. waters was in full swing, with progress reported from several sides.

A deal must be ratified by parliaments in both Britain and the EU. The British Parliament is currently on a Christmas break but could be recalled next week so lawmakers can vote.

Johnson's large majority in Parliament should ensure the agreement passes, but any compromises will be criticized by hard-line Brexit supporters in his Conservative Party. The party's euroskeptic European Research Group said it would carefully scrutinize any deal "to ensure that its provisions genuinely protect the sovereignty of the United Kingdom after we exit the transition period at the end of this year."

If the two sides fail to meet the Jan. 1 deadline, a deal could provisionally be put in place and approved

by the EU parliament in January.

Businesses on both sides are clamoring for a deal that would save tens of billions in costs.

The border is already reeling from new restrictions placed on travelers from Britain into France and other EU countries due to a new coronavirus variant sweeping through London and southern England. On Wednesday thousands of trucks were stuck in traffic jams near Dover, waiting for their drivers to get virus tests so they can enter the Eurotunnel to France.

While both sides would suffer economically from a failure to secure a trade deal, most economists think Britain would take a greater hit, because it is smaller and more reliant on trade with the EU than the other way around.

Associated Press writer Raf Casert reported this story in Brussels and AP writer Jill Lawless reported from London.

Follow all AP stories on the Brexit trade talks at <https://apnews.com/Brexit>

Video released in police killing of Black man holding phone

By ANDREW WELSH-HUGGINS and MARK GILLISPIE Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — Body camera footage released Wednesday shows Andre Hill, a 47-year-old Black man, emerging from a garage and holding up a cellphone in his left hand seconds before he is fatally shot by a Columbus police officer.

About six seconds pass between the time Hill is visible in the video and when the officer fires his weapon early Tuesday. There is no audio because the officer hadn't activated the body camera; an automatic "look back" feature captured the shooting without audio.

Without audio, it's unclear whether the officer, identified as Adam Coy, yelled any commands at Hill, whose right hand isn't visible in the video. Authorities say no weapon was recovered from the scene. The city says Hill was visiting someone at the time.

Hill lay on the garage floor for several minutes without any officer on the scene coming to his aid. That violates policy requiring officers to help the injured, said Columbus Mayor Andrew Ginther on Wednesday, calling for Coy to be fired as a result.

Coy also violated departmental policies requiring his camera's full video and audio functions to have been activated, Ginther said.

Columbus police values, including integrity, compassion and accountability, "were absent and not on display while Mr. Hill lay dying," said Ginther, a Democrat.

After Coy activates the audio, he is heard using an expletive as he yells at Hill, now lying on the garage floor, to put his "hands off to the side! Hands out to the side now!"

A few seconds later, Coy yells at Hill, "Roll to your stomach now," and then: "Get your hand up from underneath you, now!"

Coy then asks a dispatcher, "We got a medic coming" and yells, "Don't move, dude!" to Hill as he lies on his side groaning.

Hill died less than an hour later at a hospital.

Ginther and Police Chief Thomas Quinlan have expressed anger that Coy did not activate his body camera beforehand. The 60-second look-back feature captured the shooting.

Officers must activate their body cameras as soon as they are dispatched to a major incident such as a shooting, robbery or burglary, under departmental policy.

Beyond that, officers must turn the cameras on "at the start of an enforcement action or at the first reasonable opportunity to do so," according to the policy.

Although Coy was dispatched on a nonemergency call, the call became an enforcement action when the officer interacted with Hill because that was separate from the original call, said police department spokesperson Sgt. James Fuqua.

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"Therefore, the camera by policy should have been activated," he said.

Coy, a 17-year member of the force, was relieved of duty, ordered to turn in his gun and badge, and stripped of police powers pending the outcome of investigations. By union contract, the officer will still be paid.

Relieving an officer of duty is common in Columbus after a shooting.

"In this case, the chief of police directly observed what he believes to be potential critical misconduct and is taking an intervening action of relief of duty until a disciplinary investigation can be completed," said Glenn McEntyre, a spokesperson for the city Department of Public Safety, which oversees the police.

Ned Pettus Jr., the city public safety director, on Wednesday promised "a fair, impartial hearing" for Coy.

Officers responded to a neighbor's nonemergency call at 1:26 a.m. about a car in front of his house that had been running, then shut off, then turned back on, according to a copy of the call released Wednesday. Ginther said it's unclear if that car had anything to do with Hill.

"I figure if it's company for the neighbors, they wouldn't be out there running it for that long period of time," the man tells the police dispatcher.

"I mean, I'd go out there, but I don't want to get in trouble. I don't have a gun," he said, laughing. "My wife's really concerned about it."

A man who answered the phone at the caller's house Wednesday wouldn't identify himself and refused to take a message.

Because the call was not an emergency, the cruiser dash cam wasn't activated.

Republican Attorney General Dave Yost on Wednesday promised a "complete, independent and expert investigation" of the shooting. The state Bureau of Criminal Investigation, which falls under the attorney general's office, conducts probes of Columbus police shootings under an arrangement with the city.

"What we have now is an incomplete record. We must allow the record to be completed and the evidence to be gathered," Yost said. "Only the truth — the whole truth and nothing else — will result in justice."

The U.S. attorney's office in Columbus has agreed to review the case for possible federal civil rights violations once the state completes its investigation.

A review of Coy's personnel file shows more than three dozen complaints have been filed against him since he joined the department in January 2002, mostly for rude or abusive language with a dozen for use of force. No details about the allegations are contained in the sparse summaries the city provided from the department's internal affairs bureau. All but a few were marked "unfounded" or "not sustained."

The Columbus Dispatch reported the city paid \$45,000 to a man in 2012 after a dashcam video showed Coy banging the man's head against the hood of a car during a drunken driving arrest. Coy was suspended for 160 hours, the newspaper reported.

Coy's personnel file also shows several commendations and two dozen compliments from people he encountered while on duty.

Gillispie reported from Cleveland.

Trump vetoes defense bill, setting up possible override vote

By KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump on Wednesday vetoed the annual defense policy bill, following through on threats to veto a measure that has broad bipartisan support in Congress and potentially setting up the first override vote of his presidency.

The bill affirms 3% pay raises for U.S. troops and authorizes more than \$740 billion in military programs and construction.

The action came while Trump was holed up at the White House, stewing about his election loss and escalating his standoff with Republicans as he pushed fraudulent conspiracy theories and tried to pressure them to back his efforts to overturn the results.

The House was poised to return Monday, and the Senate on Tuesday, to consider votes to override the

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president's veto of the National Defense Authorization Act, or NDAA.

Trump's move provoked swift condemnation, with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi calling it "an act of staggering recklessness that harms our troops, endangers our security and undermines the will of the bipartisan Congress."

Sen. Jim Inhofe, R-Okla., chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, avoided any criticism of Trump, but called the NDAA "absolutely vital to our national security and our troops. ... Our men and women who volunteer to wear the uniform shouldn't be denied what they need — ever."

Long before issuing the veto, Trump offered a series of rationales for rejecting it. He has called for lawmakers to include limits on social media companies he claimed are biased against him — and to strip out language that allows for the renaming of military bases such as Fort Benning and Fort Hood that honor Confederate leaders. Without going into detail, he has claimed the biggest winner from the defense bill would be China.

In his veto message to the House, Trump cited those objections and stated that the measure "fails to include critical national security measures, includes provisions that fail to respect our veterans and our military's history, and contradicts efforts by my Administration to put America first in our national security and foreign policy actions. It is a 'gift' to China and Russia."

He also wrote: "Numerous provisions of the Act directly contradict my Administration's foreign policy, particularly my efforts to bring our troops home."

Both the House and Senate passed the measure by margins large enough to override a veto from the president. Trump had vetoed eight bills previously, but those vetoes were sustained because supporters did not gain the two-thirds vote needed in each chamber for the bill to become law without Trump's signature.

Sen. Mark Warner, D-Va., called Trump's veto "unconscionable" and said he would "look forward to overriding" it.

In advance of the veto, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., has said the bill would help deter Chinese aggression. Other GOP backers of the measure, including Sen. John Thune of South Dakota, the second-ranking Senate leader, and Rep. Mike Gallagher of Wisconsin, a member of the House Armed Services Committee, have tweeted that the bill would counter threats from countries such as China.

Sen. Jack Reed of Rhode Island, the top Democrat on the Armed Services Committee, said Trump's declaration that China was the biggest winner in the defense bill was false. Reed also noted the shifting explanations Trump had given for the veto.

"President Trump clearly hasn't read the bill, nor does he understand what's in it," Reed said. "There are several bipartisan provisions in here that get tougher on China than the Trump Administration has ever been."

The measure guides Pentagon policy and cements decisions about troop levels, new weapons systems and military readiness, military personnel policy and other military goals. Many programs can only go into effect if the bill is approved, including military construction.

McConnell, in a rare break with Trump, had urged passage despite Trump's threat to veto it. McConnell said it was important for Congress to continue its nearly six-decade-long streak of passing the defense policy bill.

Studies find having COVID-19 may protect against reinfection

By MARILYNN MARCHIONE AP Chief Medical Writer

Two new studies give encouraging evidence that having COVID-19 may offer some protection against future infections. Researchers found that people who made antibodies to the coronavirus were much less likely to test positive again for up to six months and maybe longer.

The results bode well for vaccines, which provoke the immune system to make antibodies — substances that attach to a virus and help it be eliminated.

Researchers found that people with antibodies from natural infections were "at much lower risk ... on the order of the same kind of protection you'd get from an effective vaccine," of getting the virus again,

said Dr. Ned Sharpless, director of the U.S. National Cancer Institute.

"It's very, very rare" to get reinfected, he said.

The institute's study had nothing to do with cancer — many federal researchers have shifted to coronavirus work because of the pandemic.

Both studies used two types of tests. One is a blood test for antibodies, which can linger for many months after infection. The other type of test uses nasal or other samples to detect the virus itself or bits of it, suggesting current or recent infection.

One study, published Wednesday by the New England Journal of Medicine, involved more than 12,500 health workers at Oxford University Hospitals in the United Kingdom. Among the 1,265 who had coronavirus antibodies at the outset, only two had positive results on tests to detect active infection in the following six months and neither developed symptoms.

That contrasts with the 11,364 workers who initially did not have antibodies; 223 of them tested positive for infection in the roughly six months that followed.

The National Cancer Institute study involved more than 3 million people who had antibody tests from two private labs in the United States. Only 0.3% of those who initially had antibodies later tested positive for the coronavirus, compared with 3% of those who lacked such antibodies.

"It's very gratifying" to see that the Oxford researchers saw the same risk reduction — 10 times less likely to have a second infection if antibodies were present, Sharpless said.

His institute's report was posted on a website scientists use to share research and is under review at a major medical journal.

The findings are "not a surprise ... but it's really reassuring because it tells people that immunity to the virus is common," said Joshua Wolf, an infectious disease specialist at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis who had no role in either study.

Antibodies themselves may not be giving the protection, they might just be a sign that other parts of the immune system, such as T cells, are able to fight off any new exposures to the virus, he said.

"We don't know how long-lasting this immunity is," Wolf added. Cases of people getting COVID-19 more than once have been confirmed, so "people still need to protect themselves and others by preventing reinfection."

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With a video filmed in secret, Trump keeps sowing chaos

By JONATHAN LEMIRE and JILL COLVIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The video message that plunged Washington into chaos was filmed in secret.

President Donald Trump stood in the White House's Diplomatic Reception Room, holiday garland and gleaming ornaments draped on the fireplace behind him. He spoke into the camera not to deliver warm Christmas wishes, but to threaten to detonate Congress' \$900 billion COVID-19 relief and year-end package.

The video was released without warning Tuesday night, its recording orchestrated by White House chief of staff Mark Meadows and kept from all but a handful of aides. On Wednesday, few Republicans or even White House staffers knew what Trump plans next, in a return to the around-the-clock chaos of his first months in office.

The moment was also a flashback to the start of Trump's political career, when he delivered direct assaults on GOP leadership and the party's establishment. Now Trump appears willing to do that again on his way out of office, potentially sabotaging his party's chances of controlling the Senate as he lashes out in anger at those he believes have not supported his efforts to overturn the election.

Since his defeat by Democrat Joe Biden, Trump has been holed up in the White House with an ever-shrinking circle of aides and allies, including some pushing fraudulent conspiracy theories about the election. He has ignored the surging pandemic that is killing 3,000 Americans a day, and has mostly left it to

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others to promote vaccines being counted on to bring it to an end.

His focus has largely been on trying to overturn Biden's victory, embracing baseless conspiracy theories, pushing futile legal challenges and undermining confidence in the tenets of American democracy and the peaceful transfer of power.

The president, who has not held a public event in 10 days, departed Wednesday afternoon for more than a week at Mar-a-Lago, his coastal Florida estate. Up until the president's departure, aides were unsure whether he would cancel the trip, adding uncertainty to a fatigued, hollowed-out West Wing featuring scores of empty desks as staffers begin leaving for new jobs.

"There are mixed signals from the White House leaving more confusion than calm," Biden noted on Wednesday.

Confusion was the watchword Tuesday night when Trump released two videos, one falsely declaring that he won the election in a "landslide" and the other calling on lawmakers to increase direct payments for most Americans from \$600 to \$2,000 for individuals and \$4,000 for couples, a boost most Republicans strongly oppose.

The payments are included in sweeping legislation passed by Congress earlier this week. Trump personally played little role in the negotiations, though the White House had initially sent signals that he would sign the bill.

The president's focus has remained on the election and he has grown increasingly frustrated with Republicans who are acknowledging Biden's victory. He also complained to allies in recent days that Vice President Mike Pence, who has spent four years demonstrating his loyalty, was not doing enough to defend him. And he said he was pleased by the departure of Attorney General William Barr, who had not supported his calls for a special counsel to look into election fraud.

Trump has been buoyed by support from some House Republicans who are entertaining options for snarling congressional certification of Biden's victory in early January. Any such effort would be futile in blocking Biden, but would likely deepen the disinformation campaign Trump and his allies have launched since Election Day to undercut the incoming president's legitimacy.

Whether Trump is threatening to hold up the relief bill simply to spite Republicans is unclear. But the timing of his declarations is particularly problematic for the party, given the upcoming Senate runoffs in Georgia, which will determine whether Republicans can keep control of the chamber.

There are also personal political considerations at play for Trump. Aides believed that fighting to put more money in the hands of average Americans could boost his popularity and populist credentials for whatever his potential next move might be, including a possible presidential run in 2024.

Some of his aides have already begun planning for a post-presidency with Trump in Florida, where the outgoing chief executive is expected to reside after he leaves office. Trump is expected to remain highly visible after leaving office and may launch political and media endeavors even if he holds off on announcing another possible campaign.

But now sequestered in near-isolation in the White House, Trump has paid attention to attorneys Rudy Giuliani and Sidney Powell, both promoting election conspiracy theories, and listened to his former national security adviser Michael Flynn's push to declare martial law. Yet he rebuked aides who urged him to denounce Russia for likely perpetrating a vast hack directed at the computer systems of U.S. government agencies.

Adding to the tumult, Trump on Wednesday vetoed the annual defense policy bill, following through on threats against a measure that has broad bipartisan support in Congress. It potentially sets up the first override vote of his presidency.

And while Trump has disengaged from the pandemic, he did use the powers of the office when he pardoned 15 people, including a pair of congressional Republicans who were strong early supporters, a 2016 campaign official ensnared in the Russia probe, and former government contractors convicted in a 2007 massacre in Baghdad. And within minutes of Air Force One lifting off for Florida, Trump sent out a warning tweet to Iran after a recent series of rocket attacks in Iraq by Iranian-backed militias.

Lemire reported from New York. Associated Press writer Lisa Mascaro contributed reporting from Washington.

British model, fashion muse Stella Tennant dies at 50

LONDON (AP) — Stella Tennant, the aristocratic British model who was a muse to designers such as Karl Lagerfeld and Gianni Versace, died suddenly at the age of 50, her family said Wednesday.

Tennant, the granddaughter of a duke, rose to fame in the 1990s while walking the runway for Versace, Alexander McQueen and other designers.

In a statement, her family said: "It is with great sadness we announce the sudden death of Stella Tennant on Dec. 22."

"Stella was a wonderful woman and an inspiration to us all. She will be greatly missed," it said.

The family asked for privacy and said arrangements for a memorial service would be announced later. They did not disclose her cause of death.

Police Scotland said officers were called to an address in the Scottish Borders town of Duns on Tuesday following the sudden death of a 50-year-old woman. Police said there were no suspicious circumstances.

The granddaughter of the 11th Duke of Devonshire Andrew Cavendish and his wife Deborah Mitford of a glamorous, unconventional aristocratic family, Tennant was one of the leading British models of the 1990s.

Late in the decade, Lagerfeld announced her as the new face of Chanel, with an exclusive modelling contract, and she became a muse to the designer.

Fashion house Versace paid tribute to Tennant on Twitter, saying: "Versace is mourning the death of Stella Tennant. Stella was Gianni Versace's muse for many years and friend of the family. We will miss you forever Stella. Rest In Peace."

Donatella Versace posted a photo of Tennant on Instagram in a tribute to the model.

"Stella, I cannot believe you are gone," she wrote. "You have left us way too soon. We met when you were at the beginning of your career. I cherish every moment we spent together. Ciao. Rest In Peace."

Stella McCartney said she was "speechless" after hearing the news.

"What sad, horrific news to end this already shocking year!" McCartney wrote in a post on Instagram that included a photo of her and Tennant. "Rest in peace, you inspiring woman. Your soul and inner beauty exceeded the external perfection, Stella."

Tennant also appeared in advertising campaigns for Calvin Klein, Chanel, Hermes and Burberry.

In 1999, Tennant married French photographer David Lasnet. She is survived by him and their four children.

"From the first time I met Stella I was completely blown away," fashion designer Marc Jacobs said on social media. "Her beauty, style and body language combined with her manners, kindness, sense of humor and personality were like no other. ... My condolences to David and her family. What a terrible, heartbreaking loss."

Politicians and vaccines: Set an example or cut in line?

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — As the first round of COVID-19 vaccinations trickled out across the United States, many members of Congress lined up at the Capitol physician's office to get inoculated.

President-elect Joe Biden got vaccinated, too, as did Vice President Mike Pence. Both rolled up their sleeves live on television to receive their shots.

For some of America's political leaders, there are practical imperatives for getting vaccinated early: their own risk factors, ensuring continuity at the highest reaches of the U.S. government and helping build public confidence in the vaccine. But there are also tricky optics for politicians to navigate, particularly with supplies of the vaccines still exceedingly limited and millions of elderly Americans and essential workers weeks away from being inoculated.

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"We want to ensure that everyone feels safe about this vaccine and sees some of the more prominent members of society getting it, but also ensure people don't say 'what about us?'" said Utibe R. Essien, an assistant professor of medicine at the University of Pittsburgh.

With the pandemic raging across the country, and more than 320,000 Americans already dead, some lawmakers with access to the vaccine said they were indeed planning to wait until more Americans could get their shots before getting theirs.

"I intend to take the vaccine," tweeted Texas Sen. Ted Cruz, a Republican. "But, because I'm healthy & relatively young, I'm going to wait until seniors & frontline workers have the opportunity to take it first."

Minnesota Rep. Ilhan Omar, a liberal Democrat who lost her father to the virus, tweeted that it was "disturbing to see members be 1st to get vaccine while most frontline workers, elderly and infirm in our districts, wait."

The debate over politicians' access to the vaccine is relatively specific to the United States. Though a handful of foreign leaders, like Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, have gotten publicly vaccinated, many have refrained.

In Canada, for example, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said he has no problem waiting for his shot.

"When there's a time for healthy people in their 40s to get their vaccine, when it's our turn, I will be as close to the front of that line as I can get," Trudeau told CP24 television. "I am super enthusiastic about getting vaccines, and I certainly want to show people that they're safe and that we trust our doctors, but there's a lot of vulnerable people who need to get these vaccines much quicker than I will, and we're going to make sure that they get it first, because that's the priority."

Canadian historian Robert Bothwell said there's less of an imperative in his country for political leaders to get the vaccine because they don't face the same skepticism of public health guidance as in the U.S.

"Canadians have trusted more in government," Bothwell said.

Indeed, the pandemic and the guidance of health authorities in the U.S. has gotten tied up in the nation's broader partisan divides. Democrats have lauded public health officials like Dr. Anthony Fauci, who called for tight restrictions to slow the spread of the virus, while some Republicans chafed against those same measures.

There are also real concerns that many Americans will be skeptical about taking the vaccines, which were developed and approved far faster than any previous vaccines. An Associated Press-NORC poll conducted earlier this year, before the FDA approved vaccines from pharmaceutical companies Pfizer and Moderna, found only half the U.S. population planned to get vaccinated.

"I'm hopeful that people say 'this senator got vaccinated, this congressman got vaccinated, and I may not trust the public health system but I trust them,'" Essien said. "The messenger has to be different."

The politicians lining up to get vaccinated in the U.S. cross the political spectrum.

Virginia Rep. Don Beyer, a Democrat who was one of the first in line for his shot, said: "Millions of Americans are waiting for shots, many of whom are workers on the front lines of this pandemic. I am not more important than they are, but national leaders must lead by example."

Several conservatives, who have been more likely to oppose strict pandemic control measures, cast the vaccinations as a necessary step toward getting Americans back to work and stabilizing small businesses. Texas Rep. Mike McCaul, a Republican, said in a video after receiving the vaccine that it will "get our economy back on track to support hard-working Americans."

Some Democrats, however, have cried foul over Republicans who did not follow earlier public health guidelines getting vaccinated before many Americans who did.

"It's interesting to watch my GOP colleagues who refused to wear a mask or practice social distancing, and who attended 'super spreader' events, jump in line to get vaccinated. Shameless," Florida Rep. Val Demming said.

Public experts, however, have warned that access to the vaccines shouldn't be tied to past actions. And some said it was okay to make politicians a priority for inoculation, given the crucial work the government needs to do to address the impact of the pandemic and other tasks.

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"It's important for our government to be functioning well," said Ashish Jha, dean of Brown University's school of public health. "We don't want to risk governors and members of Congress getting sick and dying."

Still, Minnesota State Sen. Matt Klein worries politicians will end up regretting early inoculation. He himself just got his shot, but not due to his legislative position. Klein is a doctor who treats COVID-19 patients at a Minneapolis-area hospital.

"Honestly, it should be front-line people," Klein, a Democrat, said. "I understand that a lot of the politicians are getting it to demonstrate to the public that it's safe, but I'm afraid it will instead generate resentment."

Piper Hudspeth Blackburn in Frankfort, Kentucky, Kimberly Chandler in Montgomery, Alabama, West Virginia, Josef Federman in Jerusalem, Rob Gillies in Toronto and Cuniyt Dil and Mary Clare Jalonick in Washington contributed to this report.

VIRUS TODAY: Vaccine deal reached, jobless claims still high

By The Associated Press undefined

Here's what's happening Wednesday with the coronavirus pandemic in the U.S.:

THREE THINGS TO KNOW TODAY

— Drug companies Pfizer and BioNTech have reached a \$2 billion deal to supply the U.S. government with an additional 100 million doses of the COVID-19 vaccine, which they expect to deliver by July 31. Pfizer already has a contract to supply the government with 100 million doses of its vaccine, which requires two doses per patient.

— President Donald Trump is attacking a \$900 billion COVID-19 relief package approved by Congress, demanding higher direct payments to Americans that his fellow Republicans had opposed and complaining of "wasteful" spending elsewhere in the massive legislation. It's unclear whether Trump plans a veto, which would derail long-awaited aid to individuals and businesses unless lawmakers override his action.

— The number of Americans seeking unemployment benefits fell by 89,000 last week to a still-elevated 803,000. That suggests the job market remains under stress nine months after the coronavirus outbreak sent the U.S. economy into recession and caused millions of layoffs. Before the virus struck, applications typically numbered around 225,000 a week.

THE NUMBERS: The seven-day rolling average for daily new deaths in the U.S. increased over the past two weeks from from 2,219 on Dec. 8 to 2,715 on Dec. 22, according to data from Johns Hopkins University.

DEATH TOLL: The U.S. death toll stands at 323,510 people, roughly the same as the population of Lexington, Kentucky.

QUOTABLE: "I know that God's got me. He's not going to let me get sick." — Jennifer Brownlee, 34, a fisherman from Bayou La Batre, Alabama, who was waiting at the airport in Tampa, Florida, to fly to Oregon to see her mother, who just lost a leg.

ICYMI: Patients in many U.S. hospitals who can't have visitors because of the pandemic are getting a little holiday cheer in the form of greeting cards. A variety of organizations, schoolchildren and others have made or bought cards and sent them to the institutions for distribution to patients.

ON THE HORIZON: New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio says sheriff's deputies will visit homes or hotel rooms of travelers coming from the United Kingdom to ensure compliance with the city's two-week COVID-19 quarantine requirement. De Blasio announced the action amid growing concern about a new, fast spreading strain of the virus that has been detected in the U.K.

Find AP's full coverage of the coronavirus pandemic at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>

Georgia US Senate race: Ossoff again campaigning in overtime

By BEN NADLER and RUSS BYNUM Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Though still chasing his first victory, Jon Ossoff is no stranger to the pressure of campaigning in overtime — this time for one of two crucial U.S. Senate seats that will determine control of

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the chamber.

The experience is like *deja vu* for the millennial Democrat from Atlanta, who shattered fundraising records and forced his way into a runoff for a U.S. House seat in 2017 that was closely watched as an early referendum on President Donald Trump.

Ossoff ran a formidable campaign even while being mocked by Republicans as a lightweight unqualified to occupy the seat once held by Republican Newt Gingrich. But he ultimately lost, dashing Democrats' hopes for a win in the early months of the Trump era. Those who felt let down didn't hold back their criticism: Ossoff's centrist message failed to inspire progressives. He didn't attack Republicans hard enough on key issues like health care. He fell short of giving people a clear reason to vote for him.

Just three years later, Ossoff has returned for another campaign cliffhanger. He faces Republican Sen. David Perdue on Jan. 5, when both of Georgia's GOP senators are on runoff ballots in elections that will decide control of the Senate.

At age 33, Ossoff will become the Senate's youngest member if elected. While he's sharpened his attacks and gained confidence in front of a microphone, he insists his biggest improvement has been building on the "volunteer army" of thousands who during his first run for office went door-to-door to turn out voters and fueled his campaign with small donations.

"The lesson that I learned is about the power of ordinary people, well organized and passionately committed to making change, to build power," Ossoff said in an interview. "And the infrastructure that we built in that campaign has been of lasting value."

Raised in a wealthy family in Atlanta, Ossoff was studying at Georgetown University in Washington when he landed an internship with U.S. Rep. John Lewis, the Georgia Democrat and civil rights hero. Lewis then referred him to Hank Johnson, an Atlanta-area attorney running for Congress in 2006.

Young Ossoff became the fourth member of Johnson's campaign staff, which also included the candidate and his wife. He was given free reign as the written voice of Johnson's campaign on its website and social media accounts. Johnson credits Ossoff with being "my left arm" as he won a Democratic primary upset over six-term Rep. Cynthia McKinney and ultimately took her seat in Congress.

"I invested a lot of authority in a kid, and the kid came through," Johnson said. "He was a brilliant young man. And his heart matched his intellect. That's what makes Jon sort of unique."

Ossoff worked for five years on Johnson's Washington staff. In 2013, after Ossoff inherited money from his late grandfather, he invested in a small London-based film production company. Insight TWI finances investigative documentaries and sells them to broadcasters including the BBC. Ossoff is the company's CEO.

Despite ambitious politics and business, Ossoff still faces questions about whether he has the experience to be an effective senator.

He ended up trailing Perdue in the Nov. 3 election even after fellow Democrat Joe Biden won the state's presidential vote. Biden received nearly 100,000 more votes in Georgia than Ossoff.

Clint Murphy, a former Republican consultant in Georgia who now considers himself an independent, calls himself a "reluctant Ossoff supporter" who chose the candidate in part because he sees Perdue as being too inaccessible to voters.

"I felt like Ossoff just kind of came out of nowhere and raised a lot of money," Murphy said. "I don't know if raising a lot of money makes you qualified to do anything."

Ossoff raised a whopping \$30 million for his 2017 House race, which ended in a runoff loss to Republican Karen Handel. His critics on the left said the young Democrat's money couldn't make up for a lukewarm message. At the time, Ossoff called himself "an independent voice" who would "work with anyone in Washington" as Trump's election further polarized a divided electorate.

Three years later, Ossoff is doing more to court Black and liberal voters crucial to Democrats running statewide in Georgia, where an increase in nonwhite voters helped flip the state for Biden after more than two decades of backing Republicans. He supports a \$15 minimum wage, adding a "public option" government health plan without ending private insurance, and a new voting rights act to restore federal oversight of state election laws.

And he's embraced support from national Democratic leaders, campaigning with President-elect Biden in Atlanta and joining former President Barack Obama for an online endorsement. His last campaign sought

to avoid such associations — as many Georgia Democrats have done in the past — fearing they would hurt support among swing voters who viewed party leaders as too liberal.

A sharper edge on the debate stage in October earned Ossoff 15 million Twitter views of video showing the Democrat calling Perdue “a crook” who used the COVID-19 pandemic to protect his stock portfolio while downplaying the seriousness of the virus. Perdue insisted the allegations were false. He also ducked the only runoff debate, leaving Ossoff to face an empty podium.

Rahna Epting, executive director of the progressive group MoveON.org, said she definitely sees more fight in Ossoff, whom the group criticized after his last campaign for not being liberal or aggressive enough.

“In this rising climate of crises involving climate change and COVID and economic depression, we really see Ossoff meeting that moment,” Epting said.

Perdue has made a constant drumbeat of his exaggerated claim that Ossoff is pushing a “radical socialist agenda” and has mocked him as a “trust fund socialist.” The Republican has repeatedly said Ossoff supports the Green New Deal and defunding police departments, proposals Ossoff says he doesn’t favor.

“I just don’t care about their attacks,” Ossoff said. “I don’t let it influence how I run, or let it reduce my passion advocating for policies that will help the people.”

Angelika Kausche met Ossoff when she joined his 2017 campaign as a volunteer motivated by hopes of blunting Trump’s influence in Congress. A year later, she became a candidate herself and won a seat in Georgia’s state legislature.

Kausche said Ossoff always impressed her with his intelligence and skilled outreach to young voters. And she sees an increase in his confidence. Yet even her high praise is colored with a tinge of uncertainty.

“I think Jon is really on a good trajectory,” Kausche said, “to maybe have a chance to win it in January.”

Bynum reported from Savannah, Georgia.

‘Mom’s worth it’: US holiday travel surges despite outbreak

By TAMARA LUSH undefined

TAMPA, Fla. (AP) — Some are elderly and figure they don’t have many Christmases left. Others are trying to keep long-distance romance alive. Some just yearn for the human connection that’s been absent for the past nine months.

Millions of Americans are traveling ahead of Christmas and New Year’s, despite pleas from public health experts that they stay home to avoid fueling the raging coronavirus pandemic that has killed more than 320,000 nationwide.

Many people at airports this week thought long and hard about whether to go somewhere and found a way to rationalize it.

“My mom’s worth it. She needs my help,” said 34-year-old Jennifer Brownlee, a fisherman from Bayou La Batre, Alabama, who was waiting at the Tampa airport to fly to Oregon to see her mother, who just lost a leg. “I know that God’s got me. He’s not going to let me get sick.”

Brownlee said that she would wear a mask on the plane “out of respect” for other passengers but that her immune system and Jesus Christ would protect her.

More than 5 million people passed through the nation’s airport security checkpoints between Friday and Tuesday, according to the Transportation Security Administration.

That is down around 60% from the same time last year. But it amounts to around a million passengers per day, or about what the U.S. saw in the days leading up to Thanksgiving, when some Americans likewise disregarded warnings and ended up contributing to the nationwide surge.

Michelle Lopez wondered if she made the right decision after flying from Houston to Norfolk, Virginia, where her boyfriend serves in the Navy.

“I didn’t want to go, but I haven’t seen him in so long,” said the 24-year-old, who last saw her boyfriend about five months ago and was trying to maintain their relationship.

Before flying, Lopez took a COVID-19 test that came back negative. But the two planes she took offered

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little room for social distancing. Some passengers removed their masks to eat or drink. And not everyone used wipes that airlines offer to sanitize armrests and trays.

Her layover at Chicago's O'Hare Airport was equally unsettling, she said. It was packed with people and felt hot from too many bodies. Some people wore their masks below their noses. In the bathrooms, not everyone washed their hands for at least 20 seconds, Lopez said.

She works as a medical assistant in a doctor's office. She will have to quarantine for 10 days at home and get tested again before heading back to work.

Joan Crunk, 75, and her husband, Jim, 80, of Grandview, Missouri, were at the Kansas City airport Tuesday, waiting to pick up their daughter and son-in-law, who were flying in from Savannah, Georgia, and planned to stay with them until Jan. 2. It had been a year since they had seen each other.

Joan Crunk said they talked a lot about whether to gather.

"It is very hard, and we are older. My husband is 80. There is no guarantee from one year to the next," she said as "Silver Bells" played over the airport speakers.

U.S. Surgeon General Jerome Adams encouraged people to celebrate only with people in their households, but added that if they can't follow the guidance, they should take precautions, such as ensuring good home ventilation.

"We can't let fatigue cause us to make poor decisions this holiday season that end up making us back-track, especially when we are so incredibly close to getting ourselves and everyone else across the finish line," he said, referring to the start of COVID-19 vaccinations.

Overall, the AAA projected that about 85 million people will travel between Wednesday and Jan. 3, most of them by car. That would be a drop of nearly a one-third from a year ago but still a big number in the middle of a pandemic.

Janeen Pierre was juggling a pile of luggage Tuesday and getting her two little girls to the bathroom at the Charlotte, North Carolina, airport before they boarded their flight to Orlando, Florida.

Pierre and her husband had planned to spend Christmas on a Disney cruise, but the pandemic changed their itinerary to ringing in the holidays at Disney's theme parks instead.

"Disney refunded all of our money, but American Airlines did not. So we're going to have a very Disney Christmas," she said, adding that her girls could barely contain their excitement about visiting Cinderella's Castle.

Still, she said, "With the new strains coming out, I don't know if this is the smartest idea."

Doreen Lindsay, a 48-year-old doctor, was on a layover in Atlanta, traveling home to Memphis, Tennessee, from the San Diego area, where she worked with COVID-19 patients in a field hospital. She planned to be with her son for the holidays.

"It's my son and myself, really. It's he and I. We've been through so much. And he's excited. Can you believe it? An 18-year-old man happy to have his mom coming home," she said.

Lindsey said workers at the field hospital were isolated when they completed the assignment and were tested regularly, including up to four times in a span of four days before leaving.

As for her travels, "it's not just 'oh, recreation.' I'm getting back to my place. I'm not going to another," she said. "The risk has to be worth the benefits."

Associated Press reporters Alexandra Olson in New York; Ben Finley in Norfolk, Virginia; Heather Hollingsworth in Kansas City, Missouri; Sophia Tareen in Chicago; Sarah Blake Morgan in Raleigh, North Carolina; and Sophia Tulp in Atlanta contributed to this report.

A child so sick they feared the worst, now they urge change

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

MONTPELIER, Idaho (AP) — Kale Wuthrich watched doctors surround his son in the emergency room, giving him fluids through IV tubes, running a battery of tests and trying to stabilize him. He was enveloped by the confusion and fear that had been building since his 12-year-old suddenly fell ill weeks after a mild

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bout with the coronavirus.

"He was very close at that point to not making it, and basically they told me to sit in the corner and pray," Wuthrich said. "And that's what I did."

Shortly after Thanksgiving, the boy from a secluded valley in Idaho became one of hundreds of children in the U.S. who have been diagnosed with a rare, extreme immune response to COVID-19 called multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children. Cooper Wuthrich's fever spiked as his joints and organs became inflamed, including his heart, putting his life at risk, his father said.

"Cooper had it in every organ, in his joints; his feet were swelled up the size of mine, his poor eyes were red, bugged out of his head and very lethargic, very scared," Kale Wuthrich said. "Cooper would never, has never complained about pain, but that's all he could do was tell me how bad he hurt."

After days in the hospital, Cooper is back home. But the kid who loves sledding and skiing spent much of the following days on the couch in the lounge of the Montpelier, Idaho, truck stop that his parents partly own. A short walk left him with a bloody nose, and he's still on medications that require twice-daily injections.

For Cooper's parents, his illness deepened their commitment to wearing masks and urging others to do so, though pushback can be intense in conservative Idaho. Hundreds of people have protested mask requirements for months, even forcing one Boise health official to rush home this month in fear for her child as protesters blasted a sound clip of gunfire outside her front door.

Opposition to restrictions is strong even as coronavirus patients fill Idaho hospitals. Gov. Brad Little warned that car crash victims could need to be treated in hospital conference rooms if beds run out. He's encouraged people to wear masks but is among about a dozen governors who haven't issued a statewide mandate.

Cooper caught the virus in late October, likely at school, which is open for in-person classes without a mask requirement, said his mother, Dani Wuthrich.

"He had got himself grounded, and so he hadn't been allowed to go anywhere except for to school," she said. "We kind of don't know anywhere else he could have gotten it besides school."

He recovered in a few days and was back to playing basketball after a two-week quarantine.

But as Thanksgiving approached, Cooper called to come home from practice, unusual for a kid with bottomless energy. His fever spiked above 103 degrees, and the medicine his parents gave him didn't help. He was throwing up; he tossed and turned at night.

As the days wore on and Cooper's fever refused to break, his parents rushed him to a local hospital, where doctors ran tests to try to figure out what was wrong. Not seeing improvement and suspecting appendicitis, they loaded him into an ambulance for a three-hour white-knuckle drive through the mountains to Primary Children's Hospital in Salt Lake City.

Cooper is one of about 40 kids treated for the inflammatory syndrome at Primary Children's, said Dr. Dongngan Truong, a pediatric cardiologist who is helping with a study on the illness.

"Luckily, it is a rare complication, but it's a complication that can get kids pretty sick pretty quickly," Truong said. "We need to take it seriously, because we don't know the long-term effects on the child's body, the heart, the other organ systems."

An August report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that many children with the condition had severe complications, including inflammation of the heart and kidney damage. In nearly two-thirds of cases, children went to intensive care units, and the average ICU stay was five days. It found Hispanic and Black children made up three-quarters of those with the syndrome.

A total of 1,288 kids nationwide had been diagnosed with the syndrome as of Dec. 4, and 23 had died, according to the CDC.

The root seems to be a dysfunction of the immune system, which kicks into overdrive when exposed to the virus, releasing chemicals that can damage organs. Symptoms include fever, abdominal or neck pain, vomiting, diarrhea, rash, bloodshot eyes and fatigue.

It can be tricky to identify at first because some kids have such mild COVID-19 symptoms that parents didn't know they had the virus until the inflammatory syndrome appears, Truong said. It's unclear why

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some children get the syndrome and others don't, so the only way to prevent it is to stop kids from getting the virus, with steps like masks and social distancing, she said.

Back home in Idaho, the Wuthriches are trying to persuade friends and family to take precautions. To a hunting buddy, Kale Wuthrich made his case for mask-wearing by comparing it to the camouflage he puts on his face while staking out deer.

They require masks for employees at their truck stop and restaurant, Ranch Hand Trail Stop, where they worked their way up from dishwashing and serving to part owners.

But they can't always get customers to wear masks at the outpost along a windswept highway edged by mountains, its peaked roof and white-clapboard walls standing out as a refuge for long-haul truckers. Recently, plenty of people without face coverings passed by a cowboy mannequin with an American flag-patterned mask set up at the entrance to the restaurant.

"We really wish that they would instate a mask mandate here in our county," Dani Wuthrich said. But "I don't think that will ever happen."

Virus-linked isolation of UK eases but backlog persists

By JO KEARNEY, SYLVIA HUI and ANGELA CHARLTON Associated Press

DOVER, England (AP) — Gridlock at an English port kept thousands of truckers and travelers stranded Wednesday despite a deal with France to lift a two-day blockade imposed because of a new variant of the coronavirus that had isolated Britain and raised fears of food shortages.

While some goods and passengers began arriving on French shores in the morning, many still struggled to get through. With officials warning that the backlog would take days to clear, frustrated truckers scuffled with police at the port of Dover. Some have suggested the chaos was a precursor to what Britain may face if it doesn't come to a trade agreement with the European Union before it leaves the bloc's economic embrace on Dec. 31.

"Looking around, it doesn't really seem that there's a lot of progress being made here," said Ben Richzenheim, a financial services worker who drove overnight from Scotland in hopes of getting home to Germany by car. "People are still not moving out of the way, and the authorities are not doing something either. So it's a real deadlock."

Nations around the world began barring people from Britain over the weekend after Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced that scientists said a new version of the virus whipping around London and England's southeast may be more contagious. The announcement added to anxieties at a time when Europe has been walloped by soaring new virus infections and deaths.

On Wednesday, British Health Secretary Matt Hancock said that another new variant — from South Africa — has turned up in Britain, and announced restrictions on travel from the African country.

Some European countries relaxed their travel limits on Britain on Wednesday, though many remain in place. Still, it was France's ban on freight that caused the most alarm and led to a feeling of intense isolation on the island nation, since the U.K. relies heavily on its cross-Channel commercial links to the continent for food at this time of year, especially fresh fruit and vegetables.

Fears of food shortages added to an already glum runup to Christmas in Britain, where authorities have scaled back or canceled plans to relax restrictions for the holiday as daily virus infections soar and many hospitals are nearing capacity.

Britain reported another 744 deaths and a record 39,237 confirmed cases Wednesday, and the health secretary said that millions more people in England would come under the country's most severe restrictions from Dec. 26. The rules, which close all nonessential shops and ban households from mixing indoors, already cover London and surrounding areas.

Under a deal to lift France's ban, anyone arriving from Britain is required to have a virus test capable of detecting the new variant, and soldiers and contact-tracers were sent to the Dover port to administer the tests. But drivers said traffic chaos in the area was delaying that.

Rail operator Eurotunnel said some trains carrying freight and car passengers were allowed to cross to

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the continent beneath the English Channel on Wednesday. The director of France's Calais-Boulogne port, Jean-Marc Puissanceau, said two cargo vans had so far arrived by ferry, while some truckers simply loaded their goods directly onto ferries so a colleague could pick it up on the French side.

He said no freight trucks have made the journey yet because of testing troubles, and he didn't expect any until night time. The Calais port normally brings in up to 4,000 trucks a day.

British Communities Secretary Robert Jenrick said it would take "a few days" to test all the drivers who are currently in the county of Kent.

By late afternoon Wednesday, more than 6,000 trucks were estimated to be trying to get across the Channel, with more than half — around 3,750 — scrunched up at Kent's disused Manston Airport awaiting their cue to leave. Testing facilities were in place at the airport.

The chaos came as many Britons were already bracing for travel and commerce-related disruptions, if the U.K. and the European Union can't agree on a post-Brexit trade deal by the time the country leaves the EU's tariff-free single market and customs union at the end of the year.

French authorities have insisted that this week's blockade was based on scientific concerns and not politics, but some noted it may have offered a glimpse of what Britain can expect next year.

"We thought we were OK, preparing for Dec. 31 (and Brexit), and then kaboom, we are in chaos already," Puissanceau, the French port director, told The Associated Press. The slowdowns could be worse when Brexit kicks in and French authorities will have to check customs documents as well as virus tests, he warned.

Clement Beaune, France's European affairs minister, told BFM television during a discussion about the Brexit talks that when it comes to trade, "the British side has much more dependence on Europe than the reverse."

The Netherlands, Belgium and Bulgaria relaxed travel restrictions on Britain on Wednesday, but dozens of other countries are continuing to bar travelers. Japan announced that it will reinstate an entry ban on most new arrivals from the country.

Eurostar passenger train services also resumed from Britain to the continent, but only for citizens of Europe's border-free zone, British citizens with EU residency and those with a special reason to come temporarily, such as truckers.

Liza Peirrusio, an Italian living in London, traveled to Paris on Wednesday to spend the holidays with her boyfriend.

"I've never been so happy to be a European citizen," she said as she got off the first Eurostar to arrive since the weekend.

Hui reported from London and Charlton from Paris. Associated Press journalists Jeff Schaeffer in Calais, France, Nicolas Garriga in Paris, Jason Parkinson in Dover, England, Pan Pylas in London and Lorne Cook in Brussels contributed.

An earlier version of this story corrected the first name of the French port director to Jean-Marc, not Jean-March.

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

COVID, legislation, lawsuits signal change in college sports

By EDDIE PELLIS AP National Writer

The coronavirus was only one factor in a chain of events that consumed college sports in 2020, and is poised to do more of the same in 2021 and beyond.

The virus, combined with the harsh spotlight that shined on racial inequality in the United States, further exposed the exploitative side of a system that relies heavily on Black football and basketball players to bring in the bucks.

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Against that backdrop, dueling tranches of legislation and litigation landed in the highest reaches of Washington — in Congress and the Supreme Court — fueling a growing sense that the status quo is about to be upended.

"I don't know if it's immediate, or five years down the road, but I'm pretty confident that something's going to fundamentally change," said Victoria Jackson, a sports history professor at Arizona State.

It would mean changes to an industry that generates more than \$14 billion a year, mostly from TV, ticket and sponsorship deals out of football and basketball — sports that, in college, are played in disproportionate numbers by poor, minority teen-agers who receive nothing in cash compensation for all the revenue they produce. That revenue is then used to keep smaller sports afloat and athletic departments in compliance with Title IX and other regulations that demand equal access for women on college campuses.

The most existential threat to the system in 2020: the COVID-19 pandemic.

With the virus raging in March, several conferences called off their postseason basketball tournaments, and the NCAA canceled the billion-dollar bonanza known as March Madness, proceeds from which trickle down in some form to almost every Division I school in America.

The debate then switched to how to make football work, and though hundreds of games were played as scheduled, the 2020 season has landed somewhere between disjointed and disappointing — filled with empty stadiums, dozens of canceled contests and incomplete seasons that deprived the players of the experience they'd signed up for while placing them in almost constant danger.

"Organized chaos," is what Mike Marlow, the athletic director at Northern Arizona, called it. "I do think that we saw young people and coaches and administrators really understand what we missed. What I saw in young people's faces and coaches, you realize what you miss, seeing young people accomplish their goals."

While all efforts were made to save the football season and get the 2020-21 basketball season underway, 2020 featured a steady stream of news about universities' plans to drop their so-called Olympic programs — involving smaller sports such as wrestling and gymnastics and fencing that don't produce revenue for the schools (but do help form the backbone of the U.S. Olympic team.)

As 2020 came to a close, there were at least 116 Division I programs at 34 schools slated for the chopping block, with that number expected to grow. A debate was brewing about whether there was a true financial need to drop the programs or if the schools were merely using the pandemic as a convenient excuse to make moves they'd wanted to make for a long time.

"I think the glory days of college athletics as we've known it may be over," said longtime college insider Chuck Neinas, discussing the possible end of the Olympic sports model as it currently runs in colleges, in an interview with the National Football Foundation.

The debate spilled into full view at Stanford, where hundreds of alumni were hoping to reverse an administration decision to strip 11 sports from one of the country's most robust college programs.

"By cutting sports, you're not solving the underlying problem," said Olympic fencer and Stanford grad Alex Massialas, who is leading the effort to restore the sports at his alma mater. "Stanford's financial problems, and them running a deficit, was something that happened well before the virus started."

According to Stanford, the athletic department's deficit had been projected to exceed \$12 million in fiscal 2021; after the pandemic hit, that was revised to at least \$25 million.

Also nearing a tipping point in 2020 were calls from lawmakers across the country for changes in a system that operates on the labor of unpaid athletes, who receive scholarships but not much more.

Competing bills introduced in the U.S. Senate would loosen restrictions on football and basketball players' ability to sign endorsement deals and cash in on their names, images and likenesses (NIL). Some states, such as California, Florida and Colorado, have already passed laws that trigger those changes; the federal legislation is an attempt to bring nationwide uniformity to the effort to pay players.

One bill, proposed by Sen. Cory Booker, D-New Jersey, calls on colleges to share their profits — a move that could result in six-figure salaries for football and men's basketball players.

Other plans, including the one formulated by the NCAA itself, would give players limited room to ne-

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gotiate their own sponsorship deals. But that sort of arrangement has the potential to help the rich get richer — star quarterbacks, for instance, could make six figures or more — without offering much help to the average player.

The Supreme Court, meanwhile, has agreed for the first time in more than 30 years to hear a case involving the NCAA and its rules about compensating athletes for educational-related expenses. A decision is expected in June.

“This case, and I don’t think it’s overstating it, could fundamentally change the structure of college sports and the relationship between college athletes and their schools and conferences,” said Gabe Feldman, director of the sports law program at Tulane.

Against that backdrop, 2020 is coming to a close in a manner that some critics say is becoming all too familiar.

Alabama, Clemson, Ohio State and Notre Dame were named to the college football playoff — a same-ol’-same-ol’ mix of teams that set up the possibility of an Alabama-Clemson playoff matchup for the fifth time in six years.

The TV deal for the playoff is worth around \$470 million a year, most of which trickles down to schools via the conferences. The players receive none of it directly, but the money keeps the system running — or at least the pieces of the system that weren’t dismantled in the year of COVID.

“It gives us a chance to pause and ask if the big-time has grown too big,” said Jackson, the Arizona State professor. “It gives us an opportunity to think about the philosophical approach of what playing sports in school really looks like.”

Associated Press reporters John Marshall, Jessica Gresko and Ralph Russo contributed to this report.

US layoffs remain elevated as 803,000 seek jobless aid

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The number of Americans seeking unemployment benefits fell by 89,000 last week to a still-elevated 803,000, evidence that the job market remains under stress nine months after the coronavirus outbreak sent the U.S. economy into recession and caused millions of layoffs.

The latest figure, released Wednesday by the Labor Department, shows that many employers are still cutting jobs as the pandemic tightens business restrictions and leads many consumers to stay home. Before the virus struck, jobless claims typically numbered around 225,000 a week before shooting up to 6.9 million in early spring when the virus — and efforts to contain it — flattened the economy. The pace of layoffs has since declined but remains historically high in the face of the resurgence of COVID-19 cases.

“The fact that more than nine months into the crisis, initial claims are still running at such a high level is, in absolute terms, bad news,” Joshua Shapiro, chief U.S. economist at the economic consulting firm Maria Fiorini Ramirez Inc., wrote in a research note. “With the pandemic again worsening, it is likely that claims will remain quite elevated for some time.”

The latest data on unemployment claims came on the same day that the government reported that consumer spending — the principal driver of the economy — fell in November for the first time since April. The 0.4% drop, coming in the midst of the crucial holiday shopping season, added to concerns that weak consumer spending will slow the economy in coming months. Economists suggested that the viral crisis, combined with diminished income and colder weather, likely led Americans to pull back in November.

Also on Wednesday, the government said that sales of new single-family homes sank 11% from October to November, though purchases remain up nearly 21% from a year ago. Boosted by rock-bottom mortgage rates, housing has proved resilient since the health crisis erupted last spring.

Another report Wednesday showed that orders to U.S. factories for high-cost manufactured goods rose a moderate 0.9% in November, with a key category that tracks business investment plans showing a gain. The rise in orders for durable goods, which are items that are expected to last at least three years, followed even stronger gains in recent months. The pace of orders has now nearly regained its pre-pandemic level.

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In its report on applications for unemployment aid, the government said the total number of people who are receiving traditional state benefits fell to 5.3 million for the week that ended Dec. 12 from a week earlier. That figure had peaked in early May at nearly 23 million. The steady decline since then means that some unemployed Americans are finding work and no longer receiving aid. But it also indicates that many of the unemployed have used up their state benefits, which typically expire after six months.

Millions more jobless Americans are now collecting checks under two federal programs that were created in March to ease the economic pain inflicted by the pandemic. Those programs had been set to expire the day after Christmas. On Monday, Congress agreed to extend them as part of a \$900 billion pandemic rescue package.

On Tuesday night, though, President Donald Trump suddenly raised doubts about that aid and other federal money by attacking Congress' rescue package as inadequate and suggesting that he might not sign it into law.

The supplemental federal jobless benefit in Congress' new measure has been set at \$300 a week — only half the amount provided in March — and will expire in 11 weeks. A separate benefits program for jobless people who have exhausted their regular state aid and another benefits program for self-employed and gig workers will also be extended only until early spring, well before the economy will likely have fully recovered.

A tentative economic recovery from the springtime collapse has been faltering in the face of a resurgence of COVID-19 cases: An average of more than 200,000 confirmed cases a day, up from fewer than 35,000 in early September. Hiring in November slowed for a fifth straight month, with employers adding the fewest jobs since April. Nearly 10 million of the 22 million people who lost jobs when the pandemic hit in the spring are still unemployed.

According to the data firm Womply, closings are rising in some hard-hit businesses. For example, 42% of bars were closed as of Dec. 16, up from 33% at the start of November. Over the same period, closures rose from 25% to 29% at restaurants and from 27% to 35% at salons and other health and beauty shops.

The number of jobless people who are collecting aid from one of the two federal extended-benefit programs — the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program, which offers coverage to gig workers and others who don't qualify for traditional benefits — rose by nearly 27,000 to 9.3 million in the week that ended Dec. 5.

The number of people receiving aid under the second program — the Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation program, which provides federal jobless benefits to people who have exhausted their state aid — fell by nearly 8,200 to 4.8 million.

All told, 20.4 million people are now receiving some type of unemployment benefits. (Figures for the two pandemic-related programs aren't adjusted for seasonal variations.)

States and cities have been increasingly issuing mask mandates, limiting the size of gatherings, restricting or banning restaurant dining, closing gyms or reducing the hours and capacity of bars, stores and other businesses, all of which has slowed economic activity. With vaccines now beginning to be gradually distributed, though, optimism is rising about 2021.

Months from now, economists say, the widespread distribution and use of the vaccines could potentially unleash a robust economic rebound as the virus is quashed, businesses reopen, hiring picks up and consumers spend freely again.

Until then, the limited aid Congress has agreed to won't likely be sufficient to stave off hardships for many households and small companies, especially if lawmakers balk at enacting further aid early next year. And a widening financial gap between the affluent and disadvantaged households will likely worsen.

"Recession risks are very high," said Mark Zandi, chief economist at Moody's Analytics. "I do think the economy's going to start losing some jobs here. Unemployment will probably go higher. The only thing that will save us from recession is that \$900 billion fiscal rescue package."

AP journalist Julie Walker in New York contributed to this report.

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Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Dec. 24, the 359th day of 2020. There are seven days left in the year. This is Christmas Eve.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 24, 1814, the United States and Britain signed the Treaty of Ghent, which ended the War of 1812 following ratification by both the British Parliament and the U.S. Senate.

On this date:

In 1524, Portuguese navigator Vasco da Gama — who had discovered a sea route around Africa to India — died in Cochin, India.

In 1851, fire devastated the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., destroying about 35,000 volumes.

In 1865, several veterans of the Confederate Army formed a private social club in Pulaski, Tennessee, that was the original version of the Ku Klux Klan.

In 1913, 73 people, most of them children, died in a crush of panic after a false cry of "Fire!" during a Christmas party for striking miners and their families at the Italian Hall in Calumet, Michigan.

In 1943, President Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower supreme commander of Allied forces in Europe as part of Operation Overlord.

In 1968, the Apollo 8 astronauts, orbiting the moon, read passages from the Old Testament Book of Genesis during a Christmas Eve telecast.

In 1980, Americans remembered the U.S. hostages in Iran by burning candles or shining lights for 417 seconds — one second for each day of captivity.

In 1984, actor Peter Lawford, 61, died in Los Angeles.

In 1992, President Bush pardoned former Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and five others in the Iran-Contra scandal.

In 1993, the Rev. Norman Vincent Peale, who blended Christian and psychiatric principles into a message of "positive thinking," died in Pawling, New York, at age 95.

In 2014, Sony Pictures broadly released "The Interview" online — an unprecedented counterstroke against the hackers who'd spoiled the Christmas opening of the comedy depicting the assassination of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

In 2016, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu accused President Barack Obama of a "shameful ambush" at the United Nations and said he was looking forward to working with his "friend" Donald Trump; Netanyahu's comments came a day after the U.S. broke with past practice and allowed the Security Council to condemn Israeli settlements in the West Bank and east Jerusalem.

Ten years ago: Pope Benedict XVI ushered in Christmas Eve with an evening Mass amid heightened security concerns following package bombings at two Rome embassies and Christmas Eve security breaches at the Vatican the previous two years.

Five years ago: Christian faithful from around the world descended on the biblical city of Bethlehem for Christmas Eve celebrations as an outburst of Israeli-Palestinian violence dampened the typically festive mood. California Gov. Jerry Brown pardoned Robert Downey Jr. for a nearly 20-year-old felony drug conviction that sent the Oscar-nominated actor to jail for nearly a year. William Guest, 74, a member of Gladys Knight and the Pips, died in Detroit.

One year ago: With the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris unable to host Christmas services for the first time since the French Revolution because of damage from a fire earlier in the year, the clergy, choir and congregation relocated to a Gothic church next to the Louvre Museum for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day services. Democratic presidential contender Michael Bloomberg said he had cut ties with a contractor that used prisoners to make calls for his presidential campaign.

Today's Birthdays: Federal health official Anthony S. Fauci, M.D., is 80. Recording company executive Mike Curb is 76. Actor Sharon Farrell is 74. Former U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions is 74. Actor Grand L. Bush is 65. Actor Clarence Gilyard is 65. Actor Stephanie Hodge is 64. The former president of Afghanistan,

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Hamid Karzai (HAH'-mihd KAHR'-zeye), is 63. Rock musician Ian Burden (The Human League) is 63. Actor Anil Kapoor (ah-NEEL' kuh-POOR') is 61. Actor Eva Tamargo is 60. Actor Wade Williams is 59. Rock singer Mary Ramsey (10,000 Maniacs) is 57. Actor Mark Valley is 56. Actor Diedrich Bader is 54. Actor Amaury Nolasco is 50. Singer Ricky Martin is 49. Author Stephenie Meyer is 47. TV personality Ryan Seacrest (TV: "Live With Kelly & Ryan") is 46. Actor Michael Raymond-James is 43. Actor Austin Stowell is 36. Actor Sofia Black-D'Elia is 29. Rock singer Louis Tomlinson (One Direction) is 29.