

Groton Daily Independent

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Groton Prairie Mixed

Team Standings: Shih Tzus 7, Jackelopes 4, Cheetahs 3, Chipmunks 2

Men's High Games: Doug Jorgesen 244, Brad Waage 205, Roger Spanier 192

Women's High Games: Nancy Radke 178, Michelle Johnson 177, Brenda Waage 170

Men's High Series: Brad Waage 579, Doug Jorgensen 553, Roger Spanier 518

Women's High Series: Michelle Johnson 503, Nancy Radke 449, Darci Spanier 441

Conde National League

Team Standings: Cubs 7, Mets 5, Giants 5, Braves 4, Pirates 2, Tigers 1

Men's High Games: Collin Cady 195, 182; Ryan Bethke 182; Tim Olson 179

Men's High Series: Collin Cady 537, Ryan Bethke 528, Lance Frohling 492

Women's High Games: Michelle Johnson 212, Sam Bahr 192, Mayme Baker 175

Women's High Series: Joyce Walter 484, Tanah Messenou 469, Michelle Johnson 465

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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



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Groton Area Kindergaren "What Christmas Means to Me!"



Kylie Hedges

Parent: Tamara Hedges, Groton: Christmas Joy!



Anniston Harry

Parents: Alison & Kris Harry, Groton: It just feels SO WONDERFUL!



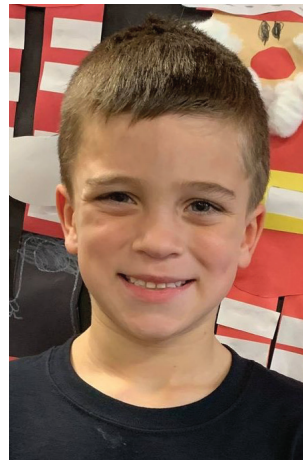
Aschar Warrington

Parents: Amy & Neil Warrington, Groton: Being nice for Santa.



Finley Gauer

Parent: Alicia Gauer, Groton: Giving thanks to Jesus.



Henry Pharis

Parents: Kara & Kevin Pharis, Groton: Eating yummy food with my family.



Maci Dunbar

Parents: Kassie & Michael Dunbar, Groton: Santa's coming!



Anna Oswald

Parents: Samantha & Matthew Oswald, Groton: The gifts and the tree.



Aryanna Cutler

Parents: Gabriella Cutler & Greyson Cutler, Groton: Spending time and having fun with my family.

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Hazel Neu

Parents: Nicole Barton & Chris Seepney and Cody Neu, Conde: I like having cool snowball fight, making snowmen and angels.



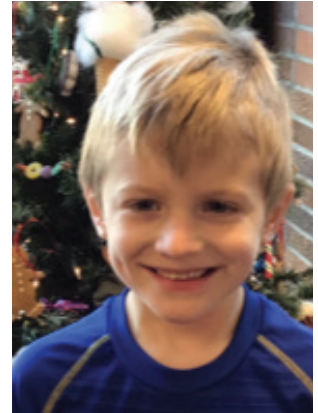
Presley Olson

Parents: Carrie & Ryan Olson, Groton: Presents!



Diego DeLoera

Parents: Joel DeLoera and Marilo Frias Coro, Andover: toys, snow and family



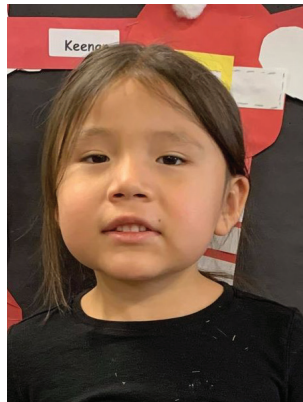
Rae Flihs

Parents: Tigh and Adrienne Flihs, Claremont: Santa comes and it snows.



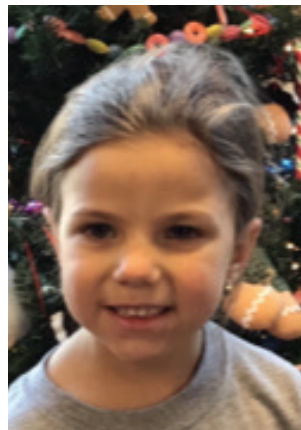
Calliope Herrick

Parents: Angela & Randy Herrick, Bristol: It means you get presents.



Jacinda Old Horse

Parent: Joanne Hairy Shirt, Groton: Being nice.



Ava Freeland

Parent: Sara Freeland, Houghton: When you can unwrap presents.



Haley Erickson

Parents: Seth and Megan Erickson, Groton: opening presents and got to Grandma's and open more presents on Christmas Eve.

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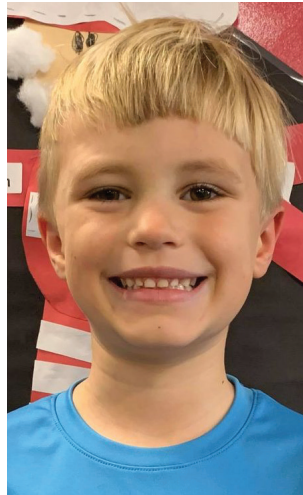
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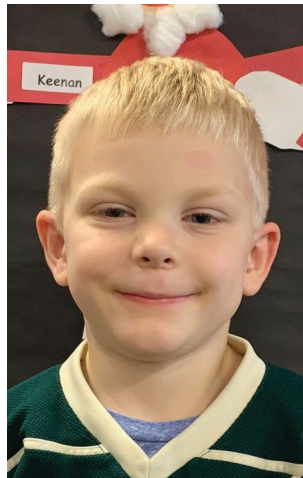
Emery Blackwood
Parent: Katie Kes-
terson, Groton: Being
good.



Jase Bahr
Parents: Samantha
& Dion Bahr, Groton: I
really like snow!



Keenan Moody
Parents: Darcie &
Eric Moody, Groton:
Getting new toys.



Mac Merkel
Parents: Hayley
Merkel & Brett Merkel,
Groton: I am so thank-
ful for Christmas.



Bless Shee Moo
Parents: EhMoo
and PawShee, Groton:
presents, snowman,
Christmas trees.



Reagen Harry
Parents: Jeff and
Besty Harry, Groton:
holidays and going to
my grandmas and get-
ting toys.



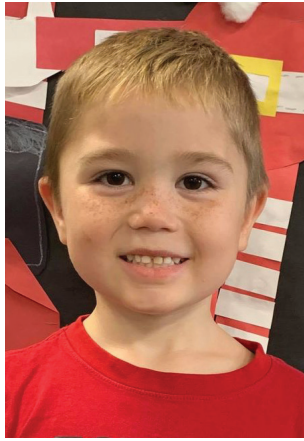
Elsy Hagen
Parents: Lenny
and Theresa Hagen,
Columbia: loving and
having fun in snow.



Jack Henderson
Parents: son of
Brad and Michelle
Henderson, Groton:
Santa comes and
leaves presents under
our Christmas tree.

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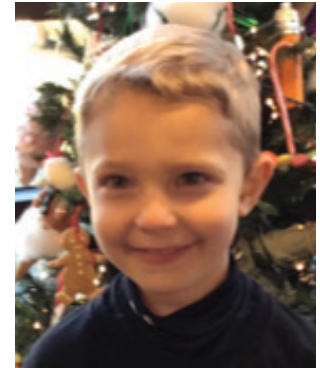
Chase Cleveland
Parents: Gretchen & Justin Cleveland, Groton: Getting candy!



Nori Hinman
Parents: Charity & Scotty Hinman, Groton: There is snow, presents, and Santa.



Hazel Hill
Parents: Jason and Tara Hill, Groton: Snow and presents and we celebrate Jesus' birthday.



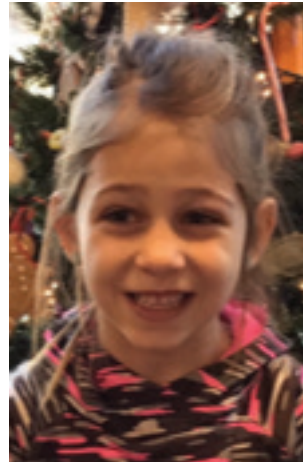
Jeremiah Yeigh
Parents: Caleb and Desiree Yeigh, Ab-erdeen: it is Jesus birthday.



Kaleb Hofer
Parents: Ricky and Sarah Hofer, Groton: We open presents and we can build a snowman.



Cora Kotzer
Parents: Kevin and Becky Kotzer, Groton: getting presents and making snowmen with your family and sled- ding outside.



Skyler Jacobsen
Parents: Matt and Nicole Jacobsen, Conde: Holidays and gifts and snow.



Jozie Lord
Parents: Randy and Alyssa Lord, Groton: decorating the tree and wrap presents.

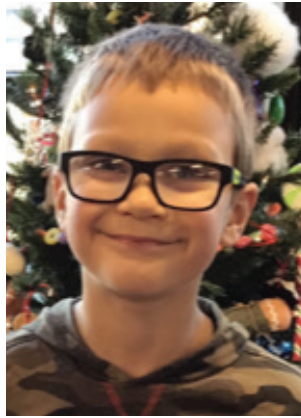
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Presley Giedt

Parents: Heath and Katelyn Giedt, Aberdeen: spending time together with my family, opening gifts with my family and make gingerbread houses and going to my Grandma Loris to open presents



Jacob Morehouse

Parents: Jesse and Julie Morehouse, Andover: presents and snow and Santa.



Logan Osterman

Parents: Jason and Bridget Osterman, Andover: we get presents, Jesus birthday



Railey Mulder

Parents: Tony and Jackie Mulder, Bath: getting presents and decorating the tree and it is Jesus Birthday.



Henry Paulson

Parents: Andy and Kara Paulson, Andover: wrapping presents, putting a Christmas tree, and Jesus birthday

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Merry Christmas from our house to yours!

Paul, Tina, Julianna and Jeslyn Kosel

The Groton Independent / GDILIVE.COM

#305 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by arie Miller

I have an abbreviated Christmas Eve report. Numbers are lighter today, as I expect they will be into next week.

There were 201,800 new cases reported today, bringing us to 18,688,300, which is 1.1% higher than yesterday's total. Hospitalizations are at 199,463, another record which breaks the old one (from just yesterday) by quite a lot. This is the third consecutive day with a record number. And there were 2915 deaths reported today. We have now lost 329,055 Americans to this virus, 0.9% more than we had lost yesterday.

If you are grieving a loss this Christmas, may the day land softly; if you are not, be sure to be grateful for the important people still in your life. If you are struggling in any way, I wish you relief; if your life is good, remember there are those not so fortunately situated and reach out. We create the world we live in by our actions, so if the one you're looking at doesn't suit you, step up and do something about it. We all have the power to effect change if only in one other life. Joy of the season to you all.

Be well. We'll talk again.

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December 24th 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: +500 (96,546 total) Positivity Rate: 9.1%

Total Tests: 5517 (737,756 total)

Hospitalized: +11 (5503 total). 312 currently hospitalized (-25)

Avera St. Luke's: 9 (-1) COVID-19 Occupied beds, 2 (0) COVID-19 ICU Beds, 1 (0) COVID-19 ventilators.

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

Deaths: +41 (1430 total)

Females: 17, Males: 24

20s=1, 40s=1, 50s=3, 60s=5, 70s=9, 80+=22

Counties: Brookings-1, Butte-1, Campbell-4, Charles Mix-1, Corson-3, Day-1, Dewey-1, Fall River-1, Faulk-1,

Grant-3, Lake-1, Lawrence-1, Lincoln-1, Meade-2, Minnehaha-6, Oglala Lakota-1, Pennington-3, Perkins-2, Roberts-5, Spink-2, Todd-1, Yankton-2.

Recovered: +681 (88,018 total)

Active Cases: -216 (7098)

Percent Recovered: 91.2%

Beadle (34) +9 positive, +9 recovered (93 active cases)

Brookings (29) +17 positive, +10 recovered (211 active cases)

Brown (54): +24 positive, +28 recovered (254 active cases)

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

Clay (11): +10 positive, +8 recovered (113 active cases)

Codington (68): +13 positive, +30 recovered (289 active cases)

Davison (52): +13 positive, +17 recovered (115 active cases)

Day (20): +3 positive, +5 recovered (45 active cases)

Edmunds (4): +13 positive, +4 recovered (49 active cases)

Faulk (11): +1 positive, +0 recovered (15 active cases)

Grant (25): +2 positive, +8 recovered (54 active cases)

Hanson (3): +0 positive, +2 recovered (15 active cases)

Hughes (25): +5 positive, +12 recovered (137 ac-

tive cases)

Lawrence (28): +15 positive, +20 recovered (155 active cases)

Lincoln (63): +43 positive, +66 recovered (540 active cases)

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

McCook (21): +4 positive, +1 recovered (42 active cases)

McPherson (1): +114 positive, +3 recovery (15 active case)

Minnehaha (257): +109 positive, +162 recovered (1756 active cases)

Pennington (127): +74 positive, +116 recovered (985 active cases)

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

Roberts (31): +7 positive, +9 recovered (100 active cases)

Spink (24): +1 positive, +2 recovered (55 active cases)

Walworth (14): +1 positive, +4 recovered (50 active cases)

NORTH DAKOTA

COVID-19 Daily Report, Dec. 24:

- 5.2% rolling 14-day positivity
- 279 new positives
- 6,939 susceptible test encounters
- 122 currently hospitalized (+4)
- 2,321 active cases (-68)
- 1,260 total deaths (+17)

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County	Positive Cases	Recovered Cases	Negative Persons	Deceased Among Cases	Community Spread	% RT-PCR Test Positivity Rate (Weekly)
Aurora	406	377	763	8	Substantial	27.59%
Beadle	2476	2349	5108	34	Substantial	7.63%
Bennett	351	329	1078	8	Moderate	8.22%
Bon Homme	1462	1398	1858	23	Substantial	13.89%
Brookings	2875	2635	9816	29	Substantial	7.36%
Brown	4287	3979	10960	54	Substantial	19.47%
Brule	625	598	1676	6	Substantial	19.35%
Buffalo	410	391	852	10	Moderate	13.33%
Butte	848	774	2812	17	Substantial	15.91%
Campbell	111	104	205	4	Minimal	15.38%
Charles Mix	1085	997	3511	11	Substantial	14.81%
Clark	302	283	844	2	Substantial	5.26%
Clay	1592	1468	4451	11	Substantial	21.05%
Codington	3345	2988	8273	68	Substantial	17.47%
Corson	447	416	885	10	Substantial	41.67%
Custer	666	608	2361	9	Substantial	22.22%
Davison	2671	2504	5644	52	Substantial	15.99%
Day	516	451	1514	20	Substantial	16.05%
Deuel	399	357	983	6	Substantial	29.85%
Dewey	1240	1096	3460	12	Substantial	12.50%
Douglas	372	327	817	7	Substantial	36.00%
Edmunds	341	288	874	4	Substantial	13.13%
Fall River	434	389	2264	11	Substantial	20.80%
Faulk	310	284	591	11	Moderate	6.25%
Grant	809	730	1904	25	Substantial	30.60%
Gregory	481	432	1071	26	Substantial	26.09%
Haakon	225	181	461	7	Substantial	28.57%
Hamlin	589	515	1486	32	Substantial	13.60%
Hand	311	294	696	2	Moderate	10.34%
Hanson	306	288	597	3	Moderate	26.53%
Harding	88	81	152	1	Minimal	16.67%
Hughes	1952	1790	5505	25	Substantial	4.90%
Hutchinson	688	623	2019	14	Substantial	16.19%

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Hyde	131	129	361	0	Minimal	15.38%
Jackson	260	222	853	8	Substantial	14.71%
Jerauld	258	230	487	15	Moderate	18.18%
Jones	65	63	180	0	None	0.00%
Kingsbury	527	466	1396	13	Substantial	16.85%
Lake	1004	927	2738	14	Substantial	21.74%
Lawrence	2465	2282	7517	28	Substantial	19.06%
Lincoln	6588	5985	17124	63	Substantial	20.67%
Lyman	511	486	1696	9	Substantial	11.59%
Marshall	256	223	988	4	Substantial	20.83%
McCook	665	602	1394	21	Substantial	24.00%
McPherson	178	162	493	1	Moderate	0.75%
Meade	2160	1963	6618	24	Substantial	20.20%
Mellette	214	198	647	2	Moderate	23.53%
Miner	222	195	494	6	Moderate	26.32%
Minnehaha	24377	22364	66798	257	Substantial	15.75%
Moody	524	465	1572	14	Substantial	28.57%
Oglala Lakota	1893	1720	6158	34	Substantial	22.40%
Pennington	10802	9690	33369	127	Substantial	23.06%
Perkins	274	225	660	11	Substantial	26.15%
Potter	298	286	707	2	Moderate	4.44%
Roberts	940	809	3714	31	Substantial	21.60%
Sanborn	303	293	606	3	Moderate	4.00%
Spink	689	610	1832	24	Substantial	12.64%
Stanley	264	247	758	2	Substantial	6.67%
Sully	105	97	242	3	Minimal	0.00%
Todd	1136	1062	3744	18	Substantial	25.00%
Tripp	617	572	1310	11	Substantial	10.71%
Turner	942	828	2352	47	Substantial	18.75%
Union	1556	1379	5284	30	Substantial	18.30%
Walworth	607	543	1606	14	Substantial	25.33%
Yankton	2408	2131	8151	25	Substantial	14.39%
Ziebach	287	240	692	7	Substantial	13.33%
Unassigned	0	0	1932	0		

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South Dakota



AGE GROUP OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Age Range with Years	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
0-9 years	3576	0
10-19 years	10644	0
20-29 years	17658	4
30-39 years	15990	12
40-49 years	13803	23
50-59 years	13708	73
60-69 years	10955	179
70-79 years	5749	305
80+ years	4463	834

SEX OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Sex	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
Female	50467	692
Male	46079	738

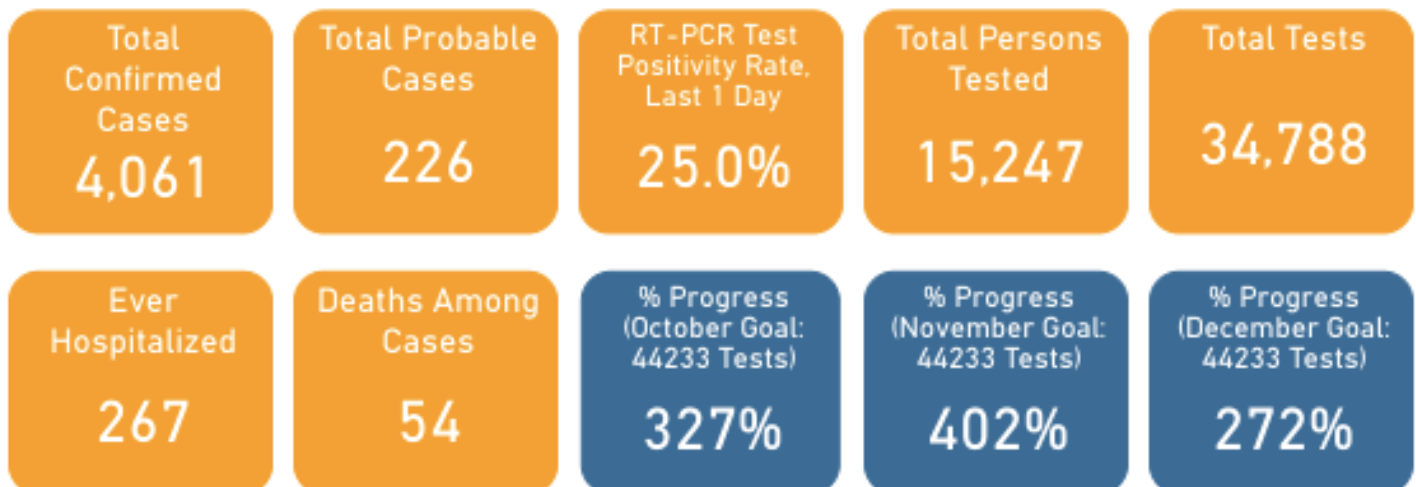
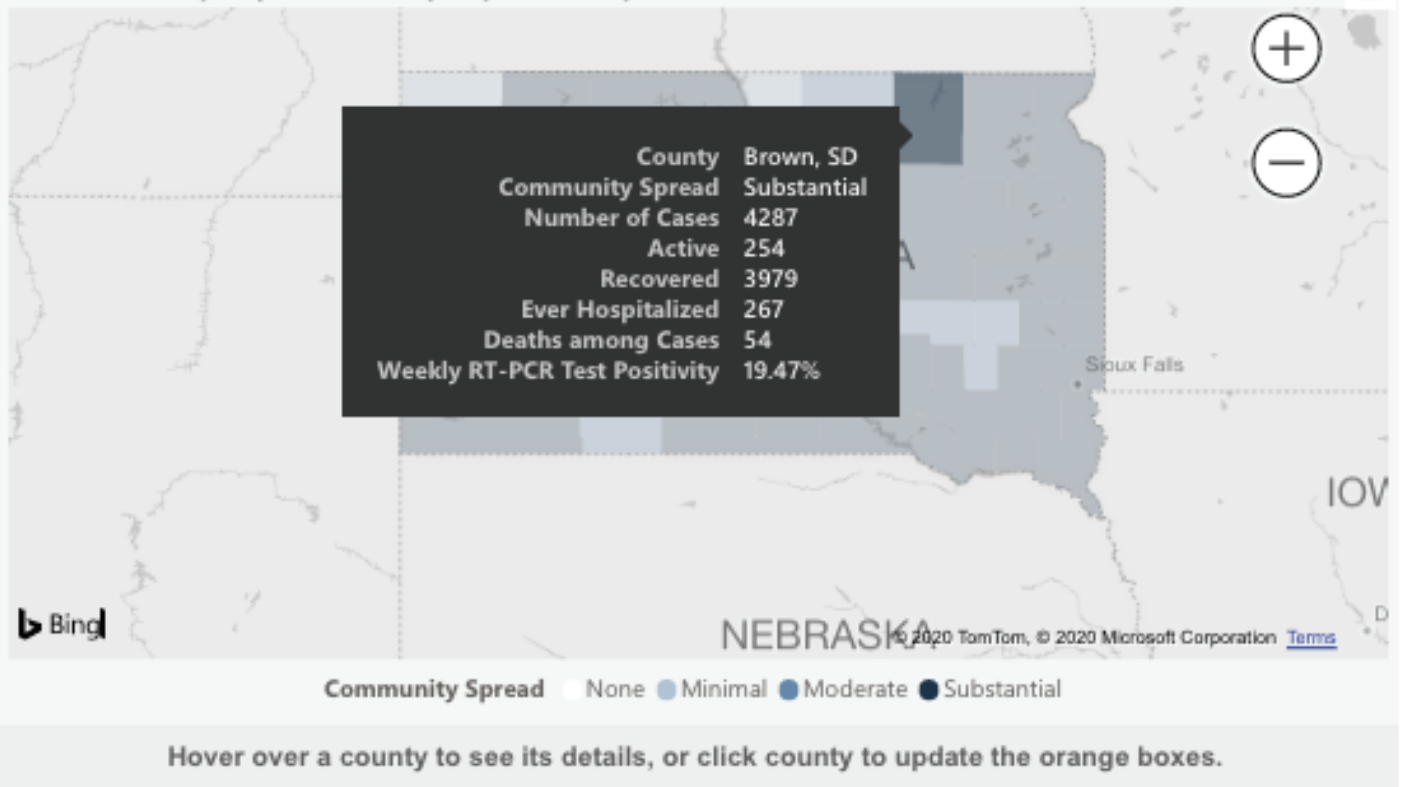
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Brown County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



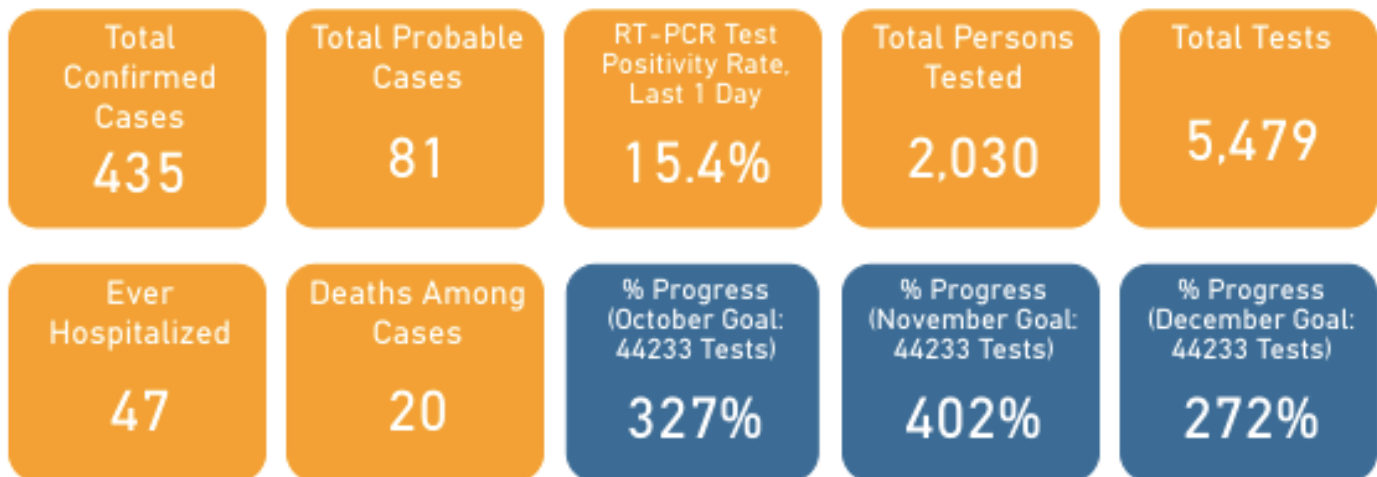
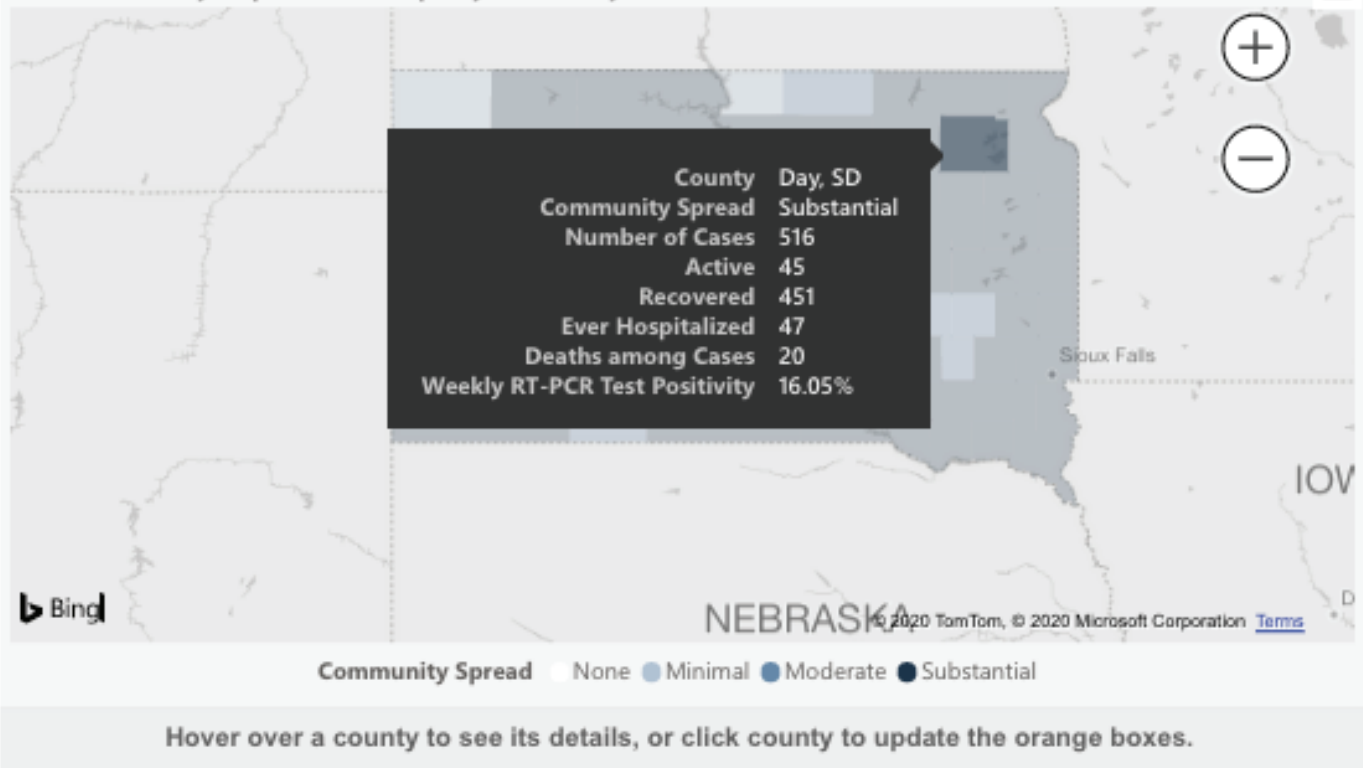
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Day County



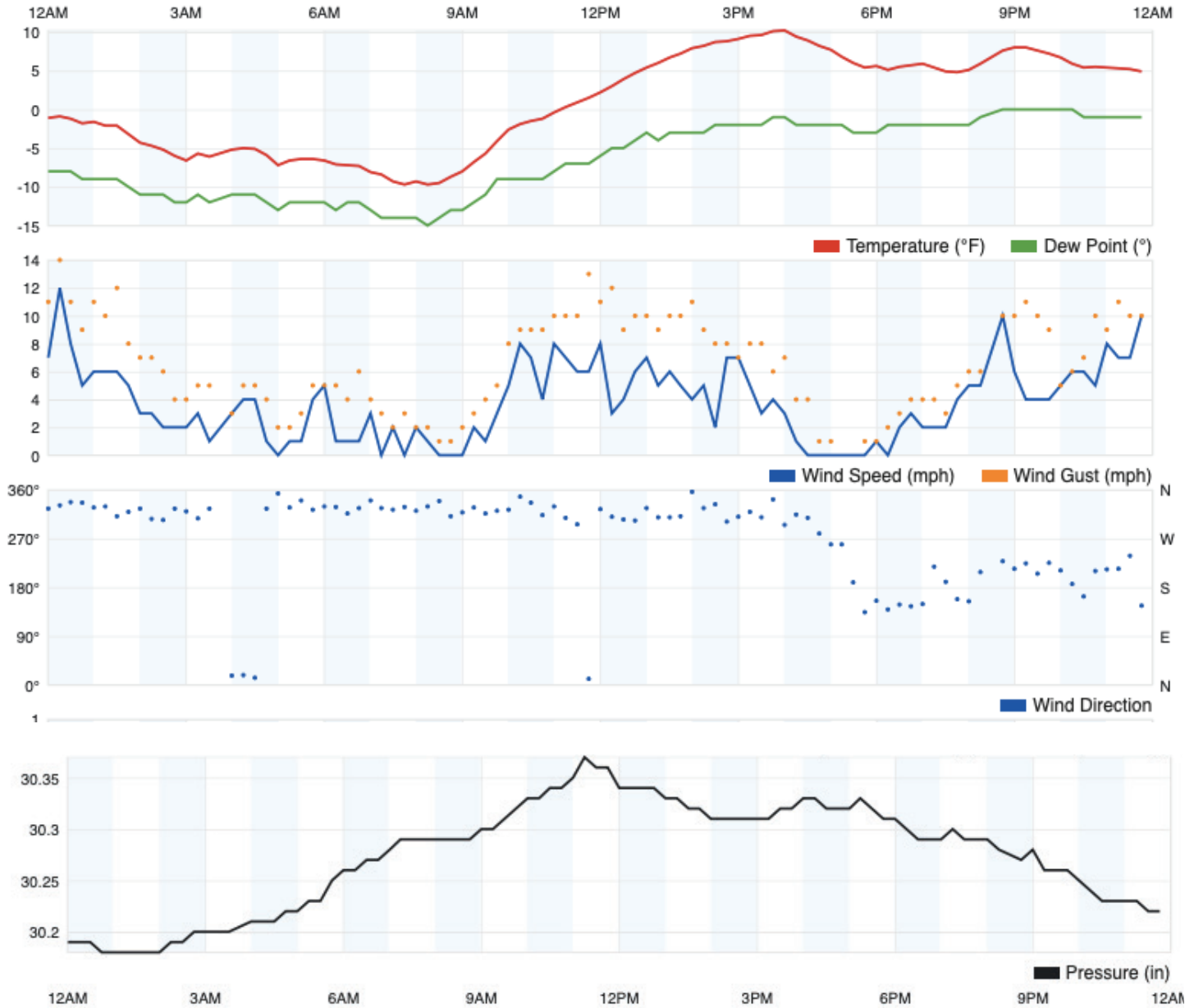
Community Spread Map by County of Residence



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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Christmas Day



Sunny

High: 36 °F

Tonight



Partly Cloudy

Low: 10 °F

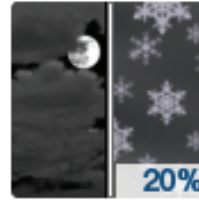
Saturday



Partly Sunny

High: 27 °F

Saturday Night



Mostly Cloudy
then Slight
Chance Snow

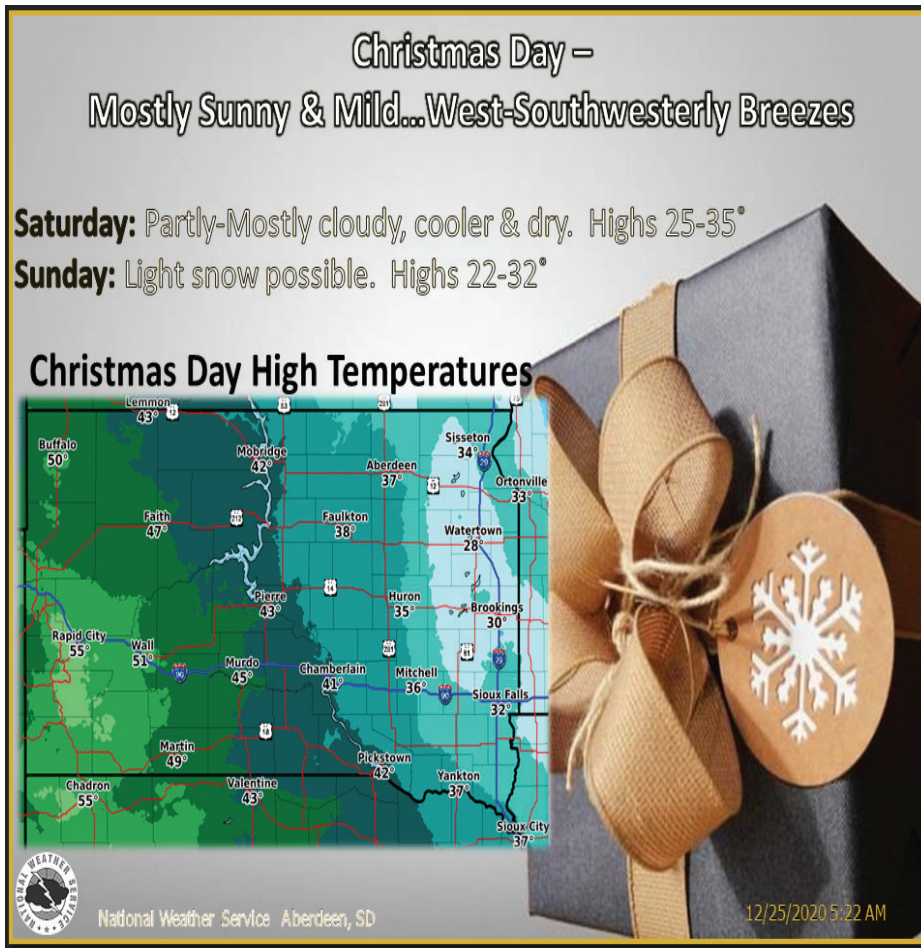
Low: 13 °F

Sunday



Chance Snow
and Blustery

High: 23 °F



Warmer temperatures will move into the area for this Christmas Day. Plenty of sunshine and west to southwest breezes will help to boost temps above the freezing mark for locales around the James Valley and points west. Areas farther east will be just a bit cooler thanks to thicker snow cover. Cooler temperatures will filter back in for the upcoming weekend. Saturday looks to remain dry with light snow returning to portions of the area on Sunday.

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Today in Weather History

December 25, 1983: Winds of 20 to 30 mph, with occasional higher gusts, combined with very light falling snow and loose surface snow to cause near-blizzard conditions and dangerously low wind chills in most of South Dakota, as well as in southwest and west-central Minnesota, from the early evening of the 23rd into Christmas morning. Visibilities were frequently near zero, and four- to five-foot drifts closed the vast majority of roads, making travel impossible. Hundreds of motorists became stranded during the evenings of December 23rd and 24th. In Minnesota, many holiday travelers heading west from Minneapolis and St. Paul drove to central Minnesota before conditions became too severe to continue. Winds and severe cold in the western part of Minnesota caused several power outages as well as the loss of livestock.

In South Dakota, at least 70 vehicles were stalled at one point over a 14-mile stretch of Interstate 90 between Kennebec and Reliance in Lyman County. The Pierre Airport in Hughes County was closed twice on the 23rd as visibility was reduced to zero. Most flights were canceled at Sioux Falls Airport in Minnehaha County, stranding numerous holiday travelers. Sub-zero temperatures, combined with gusts of over 60 mph, produced wind chill indices in the 60 to 100 below zero range. Several cases of frostbite were reported, propane gas solidified, fuel jelled, and water pipes and tanks froze as a result of the extreme cold. In Minnehaha County at Wall Lake, electrical outages of 12 hours were experienced from power lines snapping as a result of the cold and winds.

1776: Thomas Jefferson noted that the first winter snow fell on December 20th, but did not last on the ground one day. Temperatures dropped to 30 degrees or colder on Christmas Day. That night, 22 inches of snow fell. From the 25th of December until March 6, 10 snow covered the ground, and some of them were deep. The first rain came on the 9th of March. In Frederick County, two feet of snow was recorded.

1872: Since records began back in 1887, Columbia, South Carolina, only a trace of snow has been reported on Christmas Day. Before records, 13-hour sleet, and snowstorm occurred in Columbia and surrounding areas. Credit goes to Cary Mock, a USC geography professor who specializes in historical weather research.

1974: Cyclone Tracy was a small but powerful tropical storm that devastated the city of Darwin, Northern Territory, Australia, from December 24-26th, 1974. The storm was the second smallest tropical cyclone on record, in terms of gale-force wind diameter, behind Tropical Storm Marco in 2008. 1987: Since 1894, Tucson, Arizona, has seen snow on Christmas Day four times. The most recent event occurred in 1987 when Tucson saw 2.6 inches.

2002: A major snowstorm moved up the east coast on Christmas Day, 2002. Widespread snowfalls of a foot or more occurred across much of central New York and northeast Pennsylvania, with amounts as high as 30 inches reported over the northwest slopes of the Catskills.

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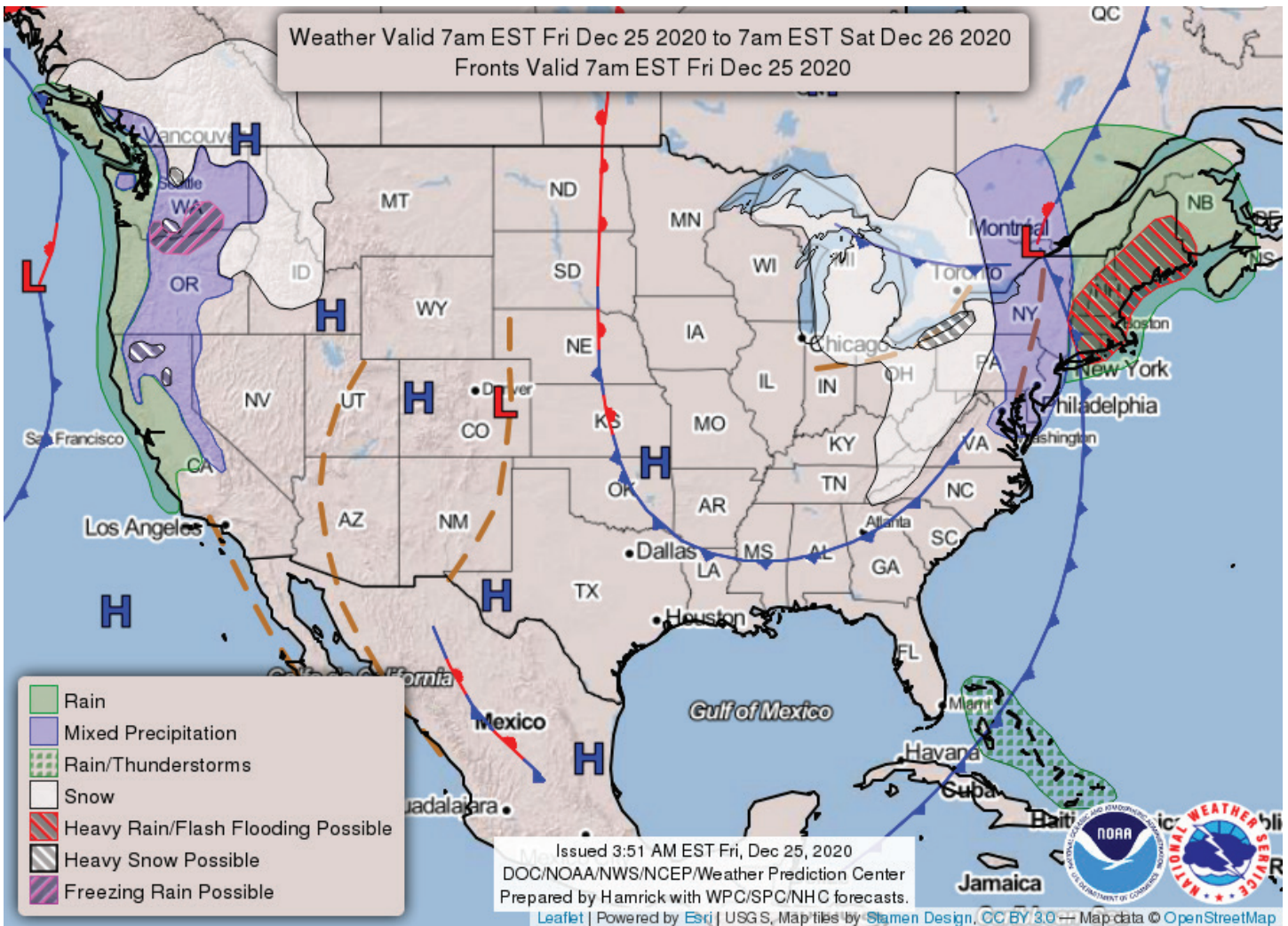
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 10 °F at 3:49 PM
Low Temp: -10 °F at 7:40 AM
Wind: 14 mph at 12:11 AM
Precip: .00

Today's Info

Record High: 56° in 1907
Record Low: -25° in 1996
Average High: 23°F
Average Low: 3°F
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.39
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 21.59
Precip Year to Date: 16.52
Sunset Tonight: 4:56 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:13 a.m.





THE BIRTH OF JESUS

" And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. She gave birth to her first child, a son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger because there was no lodging available for them.

"That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger."

Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others - the armies of heaven - praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.'

'When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go to Bethlehem! Let's see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.

'They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger."

Prayer: We lift our hearts in praise this day, Lord of Life, for the birth of Your Son, our Savior. Our minds cannot comprehend, nor our hearts contain, the generosity of Your love, mercy, grace, love, and hope that we have because of the gift of Your one and only Son. Fill our hearts with unending gratitude for Your salvation. In Jesus Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Luke 2:6-16 I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger."

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News from the Associated Press

Feds: Men trapped in trench worked for Nelsen Construction

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — The two men buried in a trench collapse in Rapid City this week worked for Nelsen Construction, a federal agency has confirmed.

The Rapid City Tribune reported that the Occupational Health and Safety Administration identified the company on Wednesday but declined to release any further information until its investigation is complete. The newspaper reported that the Nelsen Construction appears to be a small company in Rapid City with no online presence.

Officials said the two men were digging a trench for a water line in the front yard of a home on Monday afternoon when the trench collapsed. Police and medics arrived to find the men trapped under a dirt pile. Rescuers pulled one of the men free; he was not hurt. The other man died. Rescuers had to dig for five hours to retrieve his body. The men's names have not been released.

Nelsen Construction had a permit to work at the home as well as a state water and sewer contractor's license, city water officials told the newspaper.

Winter storm leaves Dakotas, Minnesota with bitter cold

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Strong winds and bitter cold pummeled the Dakotas, Minnesota and Wisconsin on Thursday as the region dug out from a winter storm that closed interstate highways and grounded flights.

The winter storm moved eastward, bringing snow into northern Wisconsin, while the Dakotas and Minnesota were left with clear skies, but icy wind. The National Weather Service issued wind chill advisories lasting until the afternoon, alerting some parts of North Dakota and Minnesota that wind chills could be 40 F below zero (-40C).

"The dangerously cold wind chills could cause frostbite on exposed skin in as little as 10 minutes," the National Weather Service warned.

The storm brought a dramatic change to a region that had experienced weeks of mild weather. In Milwaukee, temperatures climbed as high as 57 F (14C) on Wednesday, but were expected to drop into the teens, with wind chills below zero.

"It's definitely going to be a shock to the system," Paul Collar, a National Weather Service meteorologist, told the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.

Highways were reopened in Minnesota after closing late Wednesday when winds blasted snow and hundreds of accidents were reported. Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz activated the National Guard late Wednesday to assist with accidents in two counties. On Thursday afternoon he authorized troops to provide assistance across the entire state.

Sioux Falls officials use fireworks, cannons to scare geese

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Sioux Falls officials are using fireworks and cannons to scare geese away from the city's airport.

The city's animal control officers say they usually see thousands of geese migrate into the city as ponds freeze. As many as 7,000 geese can congregate by open water in the city at a time, they say.

The city needs to keep the air space around the airport and surrounding areas clear of geese and have taken to firing off pyrotechnics and propane cannons to scare them away. Animal Control Supervisor Julie DeJong told KELO-TV the cannons fire air and are environmentally friendly.

She said her staff uses the fireworks and cannons only during the daytime when planes are in the air. She said geese typically sit still on the ground at night. .

South Dakota reports 41 virus deaths as new cases decline

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STIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota on Thursday reported 41 people died after contracting COVID-19, one of the highest single-day death tallies this month.

The state has seen a sustained drop in new cases over the last month, with an average of 491 new cases over the last seven days. The Department of Health reported 500 new cases on Thursday.

Increased deaths from the virus often lag behind spikes in cases, and the state's rate of death per capita has remained among the highest in the country this month. That has pushed the state to the nation's seventh-highest rate of death per capita over the course of the pandemic, according to Johns Hopkins researchers. A total of 1,430 people have died.

The positivity rate of testing has also remained high, with 16.7% of RT-PCR tests reported on Thursday returning positive. The state's testing in December has slowed from previous months.

Meanwhile, health officials reported that 9,770 people have received a COVID-19 vaccine as the state distributes over 22,000 doses of the vaccine it received for medical workers. State epidemiologist Josh Clayton said in an email sent to health care providers that the Department of Health has not received any reports of severe allergic reactions to the vaccines.

South Dakota's new unemployment claims drop by 25%

STIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — The number of new unemployment claims processed in South Dakota dropped by nearly 25% during the most recent reporting week, state officials reported Thursday.

The South Dakota Department of Labor and Regulation reported that it processed 696 new claims for unemployment benefits during the week ending on Dec. 19. That's a drop from the 926 claims processed the previous week, but the economy continued to see the effects of the coronavirus pandemic, with unemployment numbers remaining higher than before the pandemic arrived in the U.S.

A total of 4,144 people in South Dakota were receiving unemployment benefits as of Dec. 12 — the highest number since October.

Gov. Kristi Noem has pointed to the state's relatively healthy economy to defend her decision to forego orders to slow virus outbreaks.

"South Dakota experienced a truly incredible year," Noem wrote in a message this week. "Despite the pandemic forcing businesses to adjust their practices, we're wrapping up this year in perhaps the strongest economic position in the country."

South Dakota's November unemployment rate of 3.5% was the third-lowest in the country, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

No time to rest: EU nations assess Brexit trade deal with UK

By RAF CASERT and PAN PYLAS Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — The fast-track ratification of the post-Brexit trade deal between the U.K. and the European Union got underway on Christmas Day as ambassadors from the bloc's 27 nations started assessing the accord that takes effect in a week.

At Friday's exceptional meeting, the ambassadors were briefed about the details of the draft treaty, which is believed to be around 1,250 pages long, by the EU's chief Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier.

They are set to reconvene again on Monday and have informed lawmakers at the European Parliament that they intend to take a decision on the preliminary application of the deal within days.

While voicing their sadness at the rupture with Britain, EU leaders are relieved that the tortuous aftermath of the Brexit vote had come to a conclusion in Thursday's agreement about future trade ties.

All member states are expected to back the agreement as is the European Parliament, which can only give its consent retrospectively as it can't reconvene until 2021. British lawmakers have to give their approval, too, and are being summoned next week to vote on the accord.

Both sides claim the agreement protects their cherished goals.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said it gives the U.K. control over its money, borders, laws and fishing grounds. The EU says it protects its single market of around 450 million people and contains safeguards

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to ensure the U.K. does not unfairly undercut the bloc's standards.

Johnson hailed the agreement as a "new beginning" for the U.K. in its relationship with European neighbors. Opposition leaders, even those who are minded to back it because it's better than a no-deal scenario, said it adds unnecessary costs on businesses and fails to provide a clear framework for the crucial services sector, which accounts for 80% of the British economy.

In a Christmas message, Johnson sought to sell the deal to a weary public after years of Brexit-related wrangling since the U.K. voted narrowly to leave the EU in 2016. Although the U.K. formally left the bloc on Jan. 31, it remains in a transition period tied to EU rules until the end of this year.

Without a trade deal, tariffs would have been imposed on trade between the two sides starting Jan. 1. Both sides would have suffered in that scenario, with the British economy taking a bigger hit at least in the near-term, as it is more reliant on trade with the EU than vice versa.

"I have a small present for anyone who may be looking for something to read in that sleepy post-Christmas lunch moment, and here it is, tidings, glad tidings of great joy, because this is a deal," Johnson said in his video message, brandishing a sheaf of papers.

"A deal to give certainty to business, travelers and all investors in our country from Jan. 1. A deal with our friends and partners in the EU," he said.

Though tariffs and quotas have been avoided, there will be more red tape because as the U.K. is leaving the EU's frictionless single market and customs union. Firms will have to file forms and customs declarations for the first time in years. There will also be different rules on product labeling as well as checks on agricultural products.

Despite those additional costs, many British businesses who export widely across the EU voiced relief that a deal was finally in place as it avoids the potentially cataclysmic imposition of tariffs.

"While the deal is not fully comprehensive, it at least provides a foundation to build on in future," said Laura Cohen, chief executive of the British Ceramic Confederation.

One sector that appears to be disappointed is the fishing industry with both sides voicing their discontent at the new arrangements. Arguments over fishing rights were largely behind the delay in reaching an agreement.

Under the terms of the deal, the EU will give up a quarter of the quota it catches in U.K. waters, far less than the 80% Britain initially demanded. The system will be phased in over 5 1/2 years, after which quotas will be reassessed.

"In the end, it was clear that Boris Johnson wanted an overall trade deal and was willing to sacrifice fishing," said Barrie Deas, chief executive of the National Federation of Fishermen's Organizations.

The French government, which had fought hard for fishing access, announced aid for its fishing industry to help deal with the smaller quota, but insisted that the deal protects French interests.

The president of the French ports of Calais and Boulogne-sur-Mer, Jean-Marc Puissesseau, said no matter what is in the Brexit trade deal, life for his port will become more difficult because "there will no longer be free movement of merchandise."

Some 10,000 jobs in the Boulogne area are tied to fishing and its seafood-processing industry, he said, and about 70% of the seafood they use comes from British waters.

"Without fish, there is no business," he told The Associated Press.

Angela Charlton in Paris contributed to this report.

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

Police: Explosion in Nashville may have been "intentional"

NASHVILLE (AP) —

Authorities believe an explosion that rocked the downtown Nashville area early on Christmas Day was a deliberate act, according to Metro Nashville Police Department.

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Police spokesman Don Aaron said the 6:30 a.m. explosion, which shattered glass and damaged buildings, was believed to be "an intentional act." Police earlier said they believe a vehicle was involved in the explosion. He said three people were taken to area hospitals for treatment, although none were in critical condition.

Police and fire crews were on the scene, as were investigators from the FBI and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.

"Right now, it's a public safety concern, to make sure everybody is accounted for and to make sure the spread of the fire doesn't go any further," Michael Knight, a spokesman for the ATF in Nashville, told The Associated Press.

Black smoke and flames were seen early Friday billowing from the area, which is packed with bars, restaurants and other retail establishments and is known as the heart of downtown Nashville's tourist scene.

Buildings shook in the immediate area and beyond after a loud boom was heard.

Buck McCoy, who lives near the area, posted videos on Facebook that show water pouring down the ceiling of his home. Alarms blare in the background and cries of people in great distress ring in the background. A fire is visible in the street outside. McCoy said the windows of his home were entirely blown out.

"All my windows, every single one of them got blown into the next room. If I had been standing there it would have been horrible," he said.

"It felt like a bomb. It was that big," he told The Associated Press.

"There were about four cars on fire. I don't know if it was so hot they just caught on fire, and the trees were all blown apart," he said.

Associated Press writer Thalia Beaty contributed from New York.

A pandemic Christmas: Churches shut, borders complicated

By FRANCES D'EMILIO Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Curfews, quarantines and even border closings complicated Christmas celebrations Friday for countless people around the globe, but ingenuity, determination and imagination helped keep the day special for many.

In South Africa, which is battling a spike in cases and deaths driven by a variant of COVID-19, scientist Tulio de Oliveira was spending the holiday in his lab doing genomic sequencing. He led the South African team which used sequencing to discover South Africa's variant of the coronavirus.

South Africa's new surge shows no sign of reaching a peak, say experts, and new restrictions to battle the spread of infections include the closure of many beaches which usually see large crowds of people over the holidays.

Pope Francis delivered his Christmas blessing from inside the Vatican, breaking with his traditional speech from the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica to tens of thousands in St. Peter's Square. But tourism in Italy has virtually vanished in the pandemic and the government's coronavirus restrictions for the holidays foiled any plans by locals to flock to the square.

Citing a cause for optimism amid the pandemic's bleakness, Francis said the invention of COVID-19 vaccines shines "lights of hope" on the world. In a passionate appeal to leaders, businesses and international organizations, he said they must ensure that the most vulnerable and needy in the pandemic be first in line to receive the vaccines.

Bells rang out around Bethlehem on Friday as the traditional birthplace of Jesus celebrated Christmas Day. But the closure of Israel's international airport to foreign tourists, along with Palestinian restrictions banning intercity travel in the areas they administer in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, kept visitors away.

In Beijing, official churches abruptly cancelled Mass on Christmas Day in a last-minute move, after China's capital was put on high alert following the confirmation of two confirmed COVID-19 cases last week, and two new asymptomatic cases were reported on Friday. One of several notices was posted at Beijing's St. Josephs' Church, which was built originally by Jesuit missionaries in the 17th century.

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Border crossing closures kept thousands of migrants from economically devastated Venezuela who live in Colombia from going home for Christmas. Colombia's government shut down the crossings in a bid to slow down the spread of COVID-19 infections. Those trying to return home for the holidays this year had to turn to smugglers.

Yakelin Tamaure, a nurse who left Venezuela two years ago, won't be going home and said there will be no gifts or new clothes for her two children, aged 10 and 15. Tamaure said that she hasn't been able to find work as a nurse because she still doesn't have a Colombia residence permit. Her parents are still in Venezuela.

"My mother broke her foot and can't walk properly so I'm worried about her," said Tamaure. "I try to send her money, but it's not the same as being there."

Others successfully crossed borders elsewhere only to find themselves in quarantine. For their first Christmas since getting married in March, Nattasuda Anusonadisai and Patrick Kaplin are cooped up in quarantine in a Bangkok hotel room. So they had a Christmas tree delivered to their room. They returned earlier this month from a 4 1/2-month trip to Canada and the United States. Short on tree ornaments, the couple said they put items collected on their travels, like an eagle feather, and, of course, masks.

Churches in South Korea have ignited clusters of coronavirus infections in densely populated Seoul, along with hospitals, nursing homes, restaurants and prisons. The 1,241 new daily cases reported by the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency on Friday was a record for the country.

Song Ju-hyeon, a resident in Paju, near Seoul, who is expecting a child in February, said home is the only place she feels safe now.

"It doesn't feel like Christmas anyway, there's no carols being played on the streets," she said.

It's Christmask," the Daily Nation newspaper declared in Kenya, where a second surge in cases has eased and a brief doctors' strike ended on Christmas Eve. Celebrations were muted in East Africa's commercial hub as overnight church vigils could not be held because of a curfew. Fewer people also reportedly headed home to see families, which could help limit the spread of the virus to rural communities, which are even less equipped to handle COVID-19 than cities.

In Paris, members of Notre Dame Cathedral's choir, wearing hard hats and protective suits — not against COVID-19 but for construction conditions in the medieval landmark ravaged by fire in 2019 — sang inside the church for the first time since the blaze.

In a special Christmas Eve concert, the socially distanced singers performed beneath the cathedral's stained-glass windows amid the darkened church, which is transitioning from being a hazardous clean-up operation to becoming a massive reconstruction site.

Thousands of drivers were stranded in their trucks at the English port of Dover, lacking the coronavirus tests that France was now demanding. The British army and French firefighters were brought in to help speed up the testing and free food was distributed.

Love cut through barriers of loneliness at St. Peter's Nursing home in the northern Spanish town of El Astillero. The 70 residents, mindful of thousands of coronavirus deaths at nursing homes in Spain, instead of spending the special day at relatives' homes they opted for a video chat, or a 30-minute visit, separated by a plexiglass wall.

Luisa Melero met her daughter Mercedes Arejula with that protective barrier between them. "As her daughter, I would love to have her home and hug her all the time," Arejula said. But she took heart that at the nursing home, "they are doing everything to protect her, and again, as her daughter, that's what I want."

Melero sounded philosophical. "This terrible thing has come to us, so we must accept it and deal with it with patience." Only one relative was allowed inside per visit, so on the outside of the home's fence, a granddaughter blew Melero kisses.

AP correspondents contributed to this report from around the globe.

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Pope on COVID-19 vaccine: Needy, vulnerable must come first

By FRANCES D'EMILIO Associated Press

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Pope Francis made a Christmas Day plea for authorities to make COVID-19 vaccines available to all, insisting that the first in line should be the most vulnerable and needy, regardless of who holds the patents for the shots.

"Vaccines for everybody, especially for the most vulnerable and needy," who should be first in line, Francis said in off-the-cuff remarks from his prepared text, calling the development of such vaccines "light of hope" for the world.

"We can't let closed nationalisms impede us from living as the true human family that we are," the pope said.

He called on the leaders of nations, businesses and international organizations to "promote cooperation and not competition, and to search for a solution for all."

Amid a surge of coronavirus infections this fall in Italy, Francis broke with tradition for Christmas. Instead of delivering his "Urbi et Orbi" speech — Latin for "to the city and to the world" — outdoors from the central loggia of St. Peter's Basilica, he read it from inside a cavernous hall at the Apostolic Palace, flanked by two Christmas trees with blinking lights.

Normally, tens of thousands of people would have crowded into St. Peter's Square to receive the pope's Christmas blessing and listen to his speech. But Italian measures to try to rein in holiday infections allow people to leave their homes on Christmas for only urgent reasons like work, health, visits to nearby loved ones or exercise close to home.

The pandemic's repercussions on life dominated Francis' reflections on the past year.

"At this moment in history, marked by the ecological crisis and grave economic and social imbalances only worsened by the coronavirus pandemic, it is all the more important for us to acknowledge one another as brothers and sisters," Francis said.

Fraternity and compassion applies to people "even though they do not belong to my family, my ethnic group or my religion," he said.

Francis prayed that the birth of Jesus would inspire people to be "generous, supportive and helpful" to those in need, including those struggling with "the economic effects of the pandemic and women who have suffered domestic violence during these months of lockdown."

Noting that the "American continent" was particularly hard-hit by COVID-19, he said that the pandemic compounded suffering, "often aggravated by the consequences of corruption and drug trafficking." In particular he cited the suffering of the Venezuelan people.

On a day when Christians recall Jesus as a baby, Francis drew attention to the "too many children in all the world, especially in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, who still pay the high price of war."

Among others he said sorely needed comfort at Christmas time were the Iraqi people, and "in particular the Yazidi, hard hit by the last years of war." And, he said, "I cannot forget the Rohingya people," adding that he hoped that Jesus, "born poor among the poor, will bring hope in their suffering."

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

Judge delays execution of only woman on US death row

By MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A federal judge said the Justice Department unlawfully rescheduled the execution of the only woman on federal death row, potentially setting up the Trump administration to schedule the execution after president-elect Joe Biden takes office.

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U.S. District Court Judge Randolph Moss also vacated an order from the director of the Bureau of Prisons that had set Lisa Montgomery's execution date for Jan. 12. Montgomery had previously been scheduled to be put to death at the Federal Correctional Complex in Terre Haute, Indiana, this month, but Moss delayed the execution after her attorneys contracted coronavirus visiting their client and asked him to extend the amount of time to file a clemency petition.

Moss prohibited the Bureau of Prisons from carrying out Lisa Montgomery's execution before the end of the year and officials rescheduled her execution date for Jan. 12. But Moss ruled on Wednesday that the agency was also prohibited from rescheduling the date while a stay was in place.

"The Court, accordingly, concludes that the Director's order setting a new execution date while the Court's stay was in effect was 'not in accordance with law,'" Moss wrote.

A spokesperson for the Justice Department did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Under the order, the Bureau of Prisons cannot reschedule Montgomery's execution until at least Jan. 1. Generally, under Justice Department guidelines, a death-row inmate must be notified at least 20 days before the execution. Because of the judge's order, if the Justice Department chooses to reschedule the date in January, it could mean that the execution would be scheduled after Biden's inauguration on Jan. 20.

A spokesperson for Biden has told The Associated Press the president-elect "opposes the death penalty now and in the future" and would work as president to end its use in office. But Biden's representatives have not said whether executions would be paused immediately once Biden takes office.

Montgomery was convicted of killing 23-year-old Bobbie Jo Stinnett in the northwest Missouri town of Skidmore in December 2004. He used a rope to strangle Stinnett, who was eight months pregnant, and then a kitchen knife to cut the baby girl from the womb, authorities said.

Prosecutors said Montgomery removed the baby from Stinnett's body, took the child with her, and attempted to pass the girl off as her own. Montgomery's legal team has argued that their client suffers from serious mental illnesses.

"Given the severity of Mrs. Montgomery's mental illness, the sexual and physical torture she endured throughout her life, and the connection between her trauma and the facts of her crime, we appeal to President Trump to grant her mercy, and commute her sentence to life imprisonment," one of Montgomery's lawyers, Sandra Babcock, said in a statement.

Two other federal inmates are scheduled to be executed in January but have tested positive for coronavirus and their attorneys are also seeking delays to their executions.

Follow Balsamo on Twitter at www.twitter.com/MikeBalsamo1.

One Good Thing: Hong Kong street refrigerator keeps giving

By ALICE FUNG Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — Most people who head to Woosung Street in Hong Kong's old-school neighborhood of Jordan are visiting its popular restaurants serving everything from curries to seafood. Others may be headed for a lone refrigerator, painted blue, with a sign that reads: "Give what you can give, take what you need to take."

The door of the fridge sitting outside a hockey academy opens to reveal it is stuffed with packets of instant noodles, biscuits, tins of food and even socks and towels for anyone who may need them.

Ahmen Khan, founder of a sports foundation on the same street, said he was inspired to create a community refrigerator after seeing a film about others doing the same thing. He found the refrigerator at a nearby refuse collection point and painted it blue.

"It's like a dignity, that when you go home, you open your fridge to get food," Khan said. "So I want the people to just feel like that. Even if it's a street, it's their community, it's their home, so they can simply just open it and then just put food there, and collect the food."

Khan's blue refrigerator project went viral on social media and people have been dropping by to leave food inside.

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Janet Yeung stopped by recently with a plastic bag filled with biscuits, instant noodles and snacks. She stacked them carefully inside.

"I think doing good deeds does not need to be on a large scale," Yeung said. "A small act can already show our kindness, and contribute to this world."

A resident who would only identify himself as Yeung (no relation to Janet Yeung) is one of the people benefitting from the blue refrigerator, from time to time helping himself to some food or even masks left by donors.

"Those who are really in need can take things from the fridge whenever they want without any worries, as the fridge is here 24 hours a day," he said.

Associated Press writer Zen Soo contributed to this report.

"One Good Thing" is a series that highlights glimmers of joy in hard times — stories of people who find a way to make a difference, no matter how small. Read the collection at <https://apnews.com/hub/one-good-thing>

Mali's opposition leader and ex-hostage dies with COVID-19

By BABA AHMED Associated Press

BAMAKO, Mali (AP) — Mali's opposition leader Soumaila Cisse, who was held hostage for six months earlier this year by jihadists and was considered a leading contender in 2022 elections, has died in Paris, his family said Friday.

Cissé, 71, died after contracting COVID-19, his eldest son Bocar told The Associated Press.

"The doctors did everything to keep him alive, but that's the way of God's will," he said.

The news throws Malian politics into new uncertainty. Cissé was the runner-up in the past three presidential elections and many thought he had the best chances of finally winning in 2022.

He was taken hostage by jihadists in March while campaigning for legislative elections in his hometown of Niafunke in northern Mali. He was abducted by a group affiliated with al-Qaida. Amid public pressure, the Malian government obtained his liberation in October, along with that of French and Italian hostages in exchange for the release of some 200 jihadists from Malian prisons.

Mali's interim leader Sem Ba N'Daw expressed his condolences to Cisse's family and supporters on Friday, saying millions of Malians "are in shock" at the news. Describing a meeting with Cisse after he was freed, he said Cisse's "optimism had remained intact," and said "the country still needed his experience and wisdom to face today's challenges."

No immediate funeral plans were announced.

A pandemic atlas: How COVID-19 took over the world in 2020

By The Associated Press undefined

Almost no place has been spared — and no one.

The virus that first emerged a year ago in Wuhan, China, swept across the world in 2020, leaving havoc in its wake. More than any event in memory, the pandemic has been a global event. On every continent, households have felt its devastation — joblessness and lockdowns, infirmity and death. And an abiding, relentless fear.

But each nation has its own story of how it coped. How China used its authoritarian muscle to stamp out the coronavirus. How Brazil struggled with the pandemic even as its president scoffed at it. How Israel's ultra-Orthodox flouted measures to stem the spread of the disease, intensifying the rift between them and their more-secular neighbors.

Spain witnessed the deaths of thousands of elders. Kenyans watched as schools closed and children went to work, some as prostitutes. India's draconian lockdown brought the rate of infection down — but only temporarily, and at a horrific cost.

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At year's end, promising vaccines offered a glimmer of hope amid a cresting second wave of contagion. "The winter will be difficult, four long difficult months," said Chancellor Angela Merkel, as she announced new restrictions on life in Germany. "But it will end."

Journalists from The Associated Press around the world assessed how the countries where they are posted have weathered the pandemic — and where those countries stand on the cusp of year two of the contagion.

The story of COVID-19 in BRAZIL is the story of a president who insists the pandemic is no big deal. Jair Bolsonaro condemned COVID-19 quarantine, saying shutdowns would wreck the economy and punish the poor. He scoffed at the "little flu," then trumpeted the fatalistic claim nothing could stop 70% of Brazilians from falling ill. And he refused to take responsibility when many did. He poured money into the economy to ease the pain of the pandemic. But while Bolsonaro could have inspired people to hunker down, he instead encouraged them to flout local restrictions.

Go deeper: Brazil's leader scoffs, and toll rises

Workers have returned to factories and offices, students are back in the classroom and once again long lines form outside popular hot pot restaurants. In the cities, wearing a surgical mask — though no longer required outside of subways and other crowded places — has become a habit. In many ways, normal life has resumed in CHINA, the country where COVID-19 first appeared one year ago. China's ruling Communist Party has retracted some of the most sweeping anti-disease controls ever imposed. The challenge is jobs: The economy is growing again, but the recovery is uneven.

Go deeper: China's state power crushes COVID-19

GERMANS enjoyed a largely relaxed summer with many restrictions lifted, the dividend of a rapid response to the initial coronavirus outbreak and a reliance on early and widespread testing that won wide praise. It brought the number of daily COVID-19 cases down from a peak of more than 6,000 in late March to the few hundreds by the warmer months. But as people grew lax in following the rules the numbers began to climb to nearly quadruple the March daily record, and the country now finds itself in a new lockdown as it tries to bring the pandemic back under control.

Go deeper: Early success, growing concern in Germany

A nation of 1.3 billion people, INDIA is likely to emerge as the country with the world's highest coronavirus tally. It responded to the pandemic early on with an abrupt nationwide lockdown, but the number of cases spiked as restrictions eased and its creaky public health system struggled to keep up. Questions have been raised about its unusually low death rate. India's virus worries are also multiplied by its struggling economy that recorded its worst performance in at least two decades. It will be the worst-affected among the world's major economies even after the pandemic wanes.

Go deeper: India struggles to save lives, economy

At the start, IRANIAN officials downplayed COVID-19 — denying the mounting toll of infections, refusing to close mosques, making half-hearted gestures at locking down businesses. That was then. This is now: Even Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has worn disposable gloves while planting a tree for state media, and prayed in an empty mosque to mark the holy Shiite commemoration of Ashoura. The coronavirus pandemic has only grown worse in Iran in the course of the year, threatening everyone from the day laborer on the street to the upper reaches of the Islamic Republic. Now the virus has sickened and killed top officials, becoming perhaps Iran's greatest threat since the turmoil and war that followed its 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Go deeper: No longer in viral denial, Iran struggles

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When ISRAEL went into its second nationwide coronavirus lockdown in September, most of the country quickly complied with the closure. But in some ultra-Orthodox areas, synagogues were packed, mourners thronged funerals and COVID-19 cases continued to soar. The flouting of nationwide safety rules in ultra-Orthodox areas reinforced a popular perception that the community prioritizes faith over science and cares little about the greater good. It also has triggered a backlash that threatens to ripple throughout Israeli society for years. Meanwhile, the neighboring Palestinian territories — the West Bank and the Gaza Strip — are coping with their own crises.

Go deeper: A virus widens Israel's religious rifts

In late February, ITALY became the epicenter of COVID-19 in Europe and a cautionary tale of what happens when a health care system in even one of the wealthiest parts of the world collapses under the weight of pandemic sick and dead. When the second wave hit in September, even the lessons learned from the first weren't enough to spare Italy's disproportionately old population from devastation. Despite plans and protocols, monitoring systems and machinery that were put in place to hedge against the expected autumn onslaught, thousands more died and hospitals once again were brought to the breaking point.

Go deeper: Italy becomes Europe's viral epicenter

The COVID-19 pandemic in JAPAN had a turbulent start in February when a luxury cruise ship returned to its near-Tokyo home port carrying passengers and crewmembers; their infections exploded during quarantine. The handling of the Diamond Princess triggered criticism that Japanese health officials botched the quarantine, turning the vessel into a virus incubator. Despite concerns whether the country could survive future waves of infections, Japan has been spared the dangerous surges seen in the U.S. and Europe, and hopes to host the Olympics next summer. Experts say the use of masks and border control have been key to keeping the Japanese caseload low.

Go deeper: Masks key to keeping Japan's caseload low

They say youth is a protective factor against COVID-19. In KENYA, youth have suffered anyway. From children forced into hard labor and prostitution, to schools closed until 2021, from a child shot dead by police enforcing curfew, to babies born in desperate conditions, the effects of the pandemic in Kenya have fallen hard on the young. Growing economic pressures, and Kenya's intention to close schools for almost everyone until 2021, has put enormous pressure on children, who were suddenly left to drift by the millions. Some now split rocks in quarries, or have turned to prostitution or theft.

Go deeper: Kenya's youth suffer collateral damage

For months PERU held the grim title of first worldwide in per capita COVID-19 deaths. It didn't have to be that way. Decades of under investment in public health, poor decisions at the onset of the pandemic, coupled with severe inequality and shortages of life-saving goods like medicinal oxygen combined to create one of the world's deadliest outbreaks. Now the nation is coping with crippling, mass grief. A recent poll found that 7 in 10 Peruvians know someone who has died from the virus.

Go deeper: Peru's death toll leaves a grieving nation

In the world's most unequal country, the disease hit the poor the hardest and the economic downturn sent unemployment to 42%. But SOUTH AFRICA had a secret weapon: Health professionals who are veterans of the country's longstanding battles against HIV/AIDS and drug-resistant TB. The country's leaders heeded their advice on how to deal with the coronavirus, and though there have been ups and downs, the worst-case scenarios have not yet come to pass.

Go deeper: South Africa acts quickly, dodges disaster

In 2020, SPANIARDS have normalized things unimaginable only 12 months before. But 2020 will also go down as the year in which an unknown virus shook the foundations of the social contract and threw into

question a system that failed to prevent so many deaths. Politicians boast that the system didn't collapse during that first wave, when the country recorded 929 deaths in a single day. But health professionals will tell you that the actual cost was overworked staff who fell sick more than anywhere else in the world and suffered a huge emotional toll.

Go deeper: Spanish system fails, and the elderly die

AMERICANS have been inundated by wave after wave of grim numbers — COVID-19 deaths in the hundred thousands, infections in the millions. While those figures testify to a tragedy of historic proportions, they don't fully capture the multitude of ways, large and small, that the virus has upended and rejiggered everyday life. For that, though, there are a host of other numbers, some more familiar than others, but all just as telling in tracking the pandemic's sweeping impact.

Go deeper: USA by the numbers, telling and horrifying

In MEXICO, the government did little, aside from asking its people to act responsibly. The result: more than 100,000 deaths, a number that is presumed to be an understatement. In NEW ZEALAND, the government closed its borders and shut down nearly everything, preventing all but a couple dozen deaths. The nations of the world ran the gamut in their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic — sometimes veering from strict to lax measures in the course of just a few months, or vice versa. A look at the state of the pandemic around the globe.

Go deeper: Nations ran the gamut in their response

On the Web: A Pandemic Atlas (<http://apnews.com/PandemicAtlas>)

British army helps clear backlog of virus-stranded drivers

By PAN PYLAS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Around 1,000 British soldiers were spending Christmas Day trying to clear a huge backlog of truck drivers stuck in southeast England after France briefly closed its border to the U.K. then demanded coronavirus tests from all amid fears of a new, apparently more contagious, virus variant.

Even as 4,000 international truck drivers spent yet another day cooped up in their cabs, some progress was evident Friday, with traffic around the English Channel port of Dover moving in an orderly fashion towards the extra ferries that were put on to make the short crossing across to Calais in northern France.

The military personnel were directing traffic and helping a mass testing program for the drivers, who must test negative to enter France. French firefighters have also been drafted to help the military test drivers for coronavirus.

Officials from Britain's Department for Transport said all but three of the 2,367 coronavirus tests conducted so far have been negative.

France closed its border for 48 hours to the U.K. last Sunday after British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said a variant of the virus that is 70% more transmissible is driving the rapid spread of infections in London and surrounding areas. As a result, the capital and many other parts of England have seen lockdown restrictions tightened and family holiday gatherings cancelled.

Most of the testing is being conducted at a disused airfield at Manston Airport, 20 miles (33 kilometers) from Dover. Free food and drink was being sent to the stranded truck drivers and more than 250 portable toilets were put in at Manston, with 32 others placed along the gridlocked M20 highway.

"The most reassuring thing is that food is getting through at Manston, and I have to say a big thank you to everyone who volunteered to help drivers stick it out in cold conditions in the days leading up to Christmas," said Duncan Buchanan of Britain's Road Haulage Association.

The mood among the stranded drivers appeared to be mostly sanguine, especially compared to their anger earlier this week at the situation and the lack of facilities.

"I know it's been hard for many drivers cooped up in their cabs at this precious time of year, but I assure

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them that we are doing our utmost to get them home," said British Transport Secretary Grant Shapps.

The virus has been blamed for over 1.7 million confirmed deaths worldwide, including nearly 70,000 in Britain, the second-highest death toll in Europe behind Italy.

On Saturday, Britain is extending tighter lockdown restrictions to more areas as authorities try to stem the spread of the new variant. Over the past two days, the U.K. has recorded its two highest daily infection numbers, at just below 40,000. That is stoking fears that the country's beloved National Health Service will face acute capacity issues in its hospitals soon and thousands more people will die from the virus.

In a video message to the nation, Johnson said this Christmas was "not about presents, or turkey, or brandy butter" but about hope, in the form of coronavirus vaccine shots being delivered and more vaccines being developed.

"We know there will be people alive next Christmas, people we love, alive next Christmas precisely because we made the sacrifice and didn't celebrate as normal this Christmas," the prime minister said.

Johnson said Thursday that more than 800,000 people in Britain have received the first dose of the vaccine developed by American pharmaceutical firm Pfizer and German biotechnology company BioNTech. The U.K. was the first country in the world to approve the vaccine and began inoculations for health workers and those over 80 on Dec. 8.

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

Virus changes work, not goal, of Kosovo's NATO peacekeepers

By FLORENT BAJRAMI and LLAZAR SEMINI Associated Press

PRISTINA, Kosovo (AP) — The coronavirus pandemic has reshaped the holiday celebrations of NATO's peacekeeping mission in Kosovo but left its role of more than two decades untouched.

The Kosovo Force (KFOR) mission was launched in 1999 at the end of a war between ethnic Albanian separatists and Serbian forces. More than 3,300 troops from 27 countries still are stationed in Kosovo with the goal of keeping the population safe and promoting stability in the Western Balkans.

Kosovo declared independence from Serbia in 2008, a move that Belgrade doesn't recognize. Leaders from both sides of the conflict have been accused of war crimes. Kosovo's president resigned last month to face charges at an international court in The Hague.

On Thursday, acting President Vjosa Osmani and U.S. Ambassador to Kosovo Philip Kosnett had "lunch and helped Santa deliver Christmas cards to soldiers," according to KFOR's Facebook page.

Due to the pandemic, the peacekeeping mission's headquarters in Kosovo's capital, Pristina, has limited access and required masks. Associated Press journalists were not permitted to observe any Kosovo Force Christmas celebrations, including when KFOR's commander, Italian army Maj. Gen. Franco Federici, turned on the lights of a Christmas tree provided by a small Austrian town.

A church service with a limited number of military personnel and a lunch were held instead of the usual big Christmas party.

U.S. Army 1st Lt Parker Mooney, of Portland, Oregon, said he had no specific holiday plans this year.

"I do miss my family," Mooney, 25, conceded while on patrol in Pristina. "I look forward to talking over Christmas (to them) with video."

The unusual circumstances created by the coronavirus pandemic were more difficult for Staff Sgt. Luigi Rizzo, 45, who left a young family behind in Rome when he deployed to Kosovo.

"I have a little child who is waiting for me with my wife at home," Rizzo said. "I wish Merry Christmas to them, to my family that supports me here, and I take this occasion to wish you and Kosovo, too, Merry Christmas and the new year that will come with the vaccination, the solution of this problem."

Kosovo has instituted an 8 p.m. nightly curfew to control infections. While out on patrol, KFOR personnel have encouraged people on the capital's main boulevard to respect virus-prevention measures, not an easy task with crowds out looking at holiday decorations and costumed Santas offering the soldiers fist bumps.

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Staff Sgt. Borut Zupevc, of Maribor, Slovenia, is spending his third Christmas away from family. But he said he doesn't remember the holiday season ever requiring so many adjustments or so much solitude. Many meetings among the NATO peacekeepers and with the residents they are in Kosovo to protect were held online or postponed.

"But anyway, it doesn't affect our mission," Zupevc said.

Kosovo, a country of about 1.8 million people, has reported more than 49,440 confirmed virus cases and more than 1,270 deaths as of Christmas Eve.

—
Semini reported from Tirana, Albania.

US to require negative COVID-19 test from UK travelers

ATLANTA (AP) — The United States will require airline passengers from Britain to get a negative COVID-19 test before their flight, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced late Thursday.

The U.S. is the latest country to announce new travel restrictions because of a new variant of the coronavirus that is spreading in Britain and elsewhere.

Airline passengers from the United Kingdom will need to get negative COVID-19 tests within three days of their trip and provide the results to the airline, the CDC said in a statement. The agency said the order will be signed Friday and go into effect on Monday.

"If a passenger chooses not to take a test, the airline must deny boarding to the passenger," the CDC said in its statement.

The agency said because of travel restrictions in place since March, air travel to the U.S. from the U.K. is already down by 90%.

Last weekend, Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson said the new variant of the coronavirus seemed to spread more easily than earlier ones and was moving rapidly through England. But Johnson stressed "there's no evidence to suggest it is more lethal or causes more severe illness," or that vaccines will be less effective against it.

This week, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo said three airlines with flights from London to New York — British Airways, Delta and Virgin Atlantic — had agreed to require passengers to take a COVID-19 test before getting on the plane. United Airlines on Thursday agreed to do the same for its flights to Newark, New Jersey.

Britain has been under considerable pressure since the word of the new variant of the virus was made public. Some 40 countries imposed travel bans on Britain, leaving the island nation increasingly isolated.

France relaxed its coronavirus-related ban on trucks from Britain on Tuesday after a two-day standoff that had stranded thousands of drivers and raised fears of Christmastime food shortages in the U.K.

French authorities said delivery drivers could enter by ferry or tunnel provided they showed proof of a negative test for the virus.

But the French restrictions were particularly worrisome, given that Britain relies heavily on its cross-Channel commercial links to the continent for food this time of year.

Virus magnifies the solitude for the elderly at Christmas

By EMILIO MORENATTI Associated Press

Rosa Otero prepares her dinner for another nightly meal in solitude.

This pandemic Christmas Eve has turned what should be a precious scarce moment to spend time with her family into yet another daily instalment of her life as a widow who lives alone.

Otero, 83, normally travels across Spain from her small, tidy apartment in Barcelona to northwest Galicia, to spend the winter holidays with her family.

But the restrictions on travel and urgings from health authorities that infections are on the rise have convinced Otero's family to cancel their holiday plans for this year.

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"I don't feel like celebrating anything," Otero said as she sat down to eat a plate of salmon with potatoes. "I don't like Christmas, because it brings me bad memories. My husband died in January seven years ago. Since then I feel very alone."

Otero is one of a countless number of elderly, mostly poor and hidden away indoors, who feel even more isolated than usual on the night before Christmas.

Otero misses the companionship of her neighborhood's publicly run senior center that she and many others frequent to meet up with friends, have a chat, or play a game of cards. That island of society has been cut off due to the pandemic.

Just about the only link that keeps their fragile lives connected to the wider world is the local primary care clinic. Medical workers, who have borne the heavy burden of battling the virus in Spain as elsewhere, have done what they can to keep up home visits for the elderly who lack the means to completely care for themselves.

The lifelong home of 80-year-old Francisca Cano has become a warehouse of miscellanea. Cano knits, does cross-stitch, makes paper flowers, and constructs collages from bits of wood, plastic and paper that she finds in the street.

The pandemic has meant that she can only speak to her two sisters by phone.

"We have missed one another these Christmas holidays," Cano said. "As I have grown older I have gone back to my childhood, doing crafts like a girl. That's my way of keeping the loneliness at bay."

Then there are those whose social connections had already been erased before COVID-19 make socializing a hazard.

José Ribes, 84, is used to being on his own since his wife left him. He kept the Spanish Christmas Eve tradition of eating prawns. He shelled and ate them propped up in the bed where he has all his meals and smokes cigarettes that give his home a permanent smell of stale tobacco.

"My life is like my mouth," Ribes said. "I don't have any of my top teeth, while all the bottom ones are still there. I have always been like that, having it all, or nothing."

Álvaro Puig has likewise barely noticed the impact of the virus that has deterred many families from gathering.

Puig, 81, resides in the old butcher's shop specializing in horse meat that he ran after inheriting it from his parents. Long closed for business, the countertop where he attended customers, the scales where he weighed meat, the cash register where he rang up bills, are all intact. The walk-in refrigerator, in disuse, has become a miniature living room for his existence as a cloistered bachelor. There he watches television with his pet rabbit, which he rescued from the street.

"The solitude gets to me these days. I often feel depressed," Puig said. "These holidays, instead of making me happy, make me sad. I hate them. Most of the family has died. I am one of the last ones left. I will spend Christmas at home alone because I don't have anyone to spend it with."

AP writer Joseph Wilson contributed to this report.

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No cafes, no tourists: Virus empties streets of old Athens

ATHENS, Greece (AP) — It's been a while since visitors to Greece sought out souvenirs in Athens' oldest neighborhood.

The winding streets of Plaka, laid out long before the city imported a grid system, are lined with closed stores behind aluminum shutters. The coronavirus pandemic has kept tourists away from the historic city center that forms a semi-circle around the Acropolis, and the area remained unusually devoid of pedestrians and motorists before Christmas.

In their absence, ancient monuments are a little easier to make out from a distance, fewer horns are

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sounding in traffic and homeless cats parked in front of cafes are a little less aloof.

Greece so far has imposed two nationwide lockdowns since the start of the pandemic. The first, in the spring, kept the country's infection rates low. Authorities ordered the second in response to a rapid post-summer rise in reported cases and as of Christmas Eve has seen 4,457 confirmed virus-related deaths.

The restrictions have closed bars, restaurants, coffee shops and many other businesses considered non-essential but which make up a large slice of Greece's tourism-dependent economy.

The number of visitors traveling to the country plummeted 76.1% during the first 10 months of 2020 compared to a year earlier. Spending sank 77%, according to central bank data released this week.

Greece is expected to see a 10.5% contraction of its gross domestic product this year compared to the forecasted EU average of 7.4%, while its debt-to-GDP ratio is set to surge to a staggering 208.9%.

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GOP blocks \$2,000 checks as Trump leaves COVID aid in chaos

By LISA MASCARO and ANDREW TAYLOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump's sudden demand for \$2,000 checks for most Americans was swiftly rejected by House Republicans as his haphazard actions have thrown a massive COVID relief and government funding bill into chaos.

The rare Christmas Eve session of the House lasted just minutes, with help for millions of Americans awaiting Trump's signature on the bill. Unemployment benefits, eviction protections and other emergency aid, including smaller \$600 checks, are at risk. Trump's refusal of the \$900 billion package, which is linked to \$1.4 trillion government funds bill, could spark a federal shutdown at midnight Monday.

"We're not going to let the government shut down, nor are we going to let the American people down," said Rep. Steny Hoyer, D-Md., the majority leader.

The optics appear terrible for Republicans, and the outgoing president, as the nation suffers through the worst holiday season many can remember. Families are isolated under COVID precautions and millions of American households are devastated without adequate income, food or shelter. The virus death toll of 327,000-plus is rising.

Trump is ending his presidency much the way he started it — sowing confusion and reversing promises all while contesting the election and courting a federal shutdown over demands his own party in Congress will not meet.

The congressional Republican leaders have been left almost speechless by Trump's year-end scorching of their work.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy helped negotiate the year-end deal, a prized bipartisan compromise, that won sweeping approval this week in the House and Senate after the White House assured GOP leaders that Trump supported it.

Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin boasted that the \$600 checks all sides had agreed to for Americans would be in the mail in a week.

Instead, Washington is now hurtling toward a crisis with COVID aid about to collapse, as the president is at his Mar-a-Lago club. He has been lashing out at GOP leaders for refusing to join his efforts to overturn the election that Joe Biden won when the Electoral College votes are tallied in Congress on Jan. 6.

"The best way out of this is for the president to sign the bill," Republican Sen. Roy Blunt of Missouri said Thursday. "And I still hope that's what he decides."

Racing to salvage the year-end legislation, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Mnuchin are in talks on options.

Democrats will recall House lawmakers to Washington for a vote Monday on Trump's proposal, with a roll call that would put all members on record as supporting or rejecting the \$2,000 checks. They are also considering a Monday vote on a stop-gap measure to at least avert a federal shutdown. It would keep the

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government running until Biden is inaugurated Jan. 20. Lawmakers will also be asked to override Trump's veto of a must-pass Defense bill.

After presiding over the short House session, an exasperated Rep. Debbie Dingell, D-Mich., decried the possibility that the COVID assistance may collapse.

"It is Christmas Eve, but it is not a silent night. All is not calm. For too many, nothing is bright," she said on Capitol Hill.

A town hall she hosted the night before "had people crying, people terrified of what is going to happen," she said. One father recently told her he had to tell his children there would be no Santa Claus this year.

The president's push to increase direct payments for most Americans from \$600 to \$2,000 for individuals and \$4,000 for couples drives support from Democrats but splits the GOP with a politically difficult test of their loyalty to the president.

Republican lawmakers traditionally balk at the big spending, never fully embracing Trump's populist approach. Many have opposed larger \$2,000 checks as too costly and poorly targeted.

On a conference call Wednesday 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 GOP leaders to hit the cable news shows to explain its benefits, the person said.

Yet the president has found common ground with Democrats, particularly leading liberals who support the \$2,000 payments as the best way to help struggling Americans. Democrats only settled for the lower number to compromise with Republicans.

Even if the House is able to approve Trump's \$2,000 checks on Monday, that measure would likely die in the GOP-controlled Senate, which is due back in session on Tuesday.

The president's unpredictable demands are creating more Trump-related headaches for Georgia GOP Sens. Kelly Loeffler and David Perdue, who are fighting for their political lives — and for continued GOP control of the Senate — in a pair of Jan. 5 Georgia run-off elections. They are being forced to choose whether to back or buck Trump, potentially angering voters on all sides.

The clash Thursday unfolded as the Democratic-controlled House convened for a routine pro forma session, which had been scheduled before Trump's sudden moves, when lawmakers anticipated no business being conducted.

Instead, the 12-minute House session morphed into a procedural brawl as Hoyer, the No. 2 House Democrat, sought the unanimous approval of all House members to pass the bill with Trump's proposal. GOP leader Kevin McCarthy, who was not present in the nearly-empty chamber, refused.

House Republicans then tried, and failed, to win unanimous approval of their own proposal to revisit routine foreign aid funding, which Trump had cited as one of his key objections to the overall spending package.

The year-end package Trump railed against as a "disgrace" is the product of months of work. It 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. Money is included for health care providers and to help with COVID vaccine distribution. Trump took aim at foreign aid funds in the package he has agreed to in the past and asked for in his yearly budget.

The final text of the more than 5,000-page bill required days to be compiled but Pelosi announced Thursday that it was completed and being sent to the White House for Trump's signature.

The year-end timing complicates the schedule ahead. Even if Trump doesn't formally veto the package, he could allow it to expire with a "pocket veto" at the end of the congressional session.

The Senate cleared the huge relief package Monday 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.

Artists lead efforts to restore, preserve Gaza's old houses

By WAFAA SHURAFI and FARES AKRAM Associated Press

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip (AP) — The grand, 500-year-old brick walls of the al-Kamalaiya School slowly

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emerged from years of accumulated garbage as grassroots preservers began the long process of restoring it to its former glory.

Located in the heart of the old quarter of Gaza City, the Mamluk-era building is one of an ever-dwindling number of historic structures at risk of demolition.

"It was in a very difficult, pitiful state. It was a dump," said Abdullah al-Ruzzi, an artist and leading volunteer.

Al-Ruzzi and other artists launched the Mobaderoon, or Initiators, program, seeking to save abandoned houses and buildings from two periods of Gaza's history: the Mamluk Sultanate and the subsequent Ottoman Empire.

In the old section of the Palestinian enclave, fewer than 200 houses from these eras are partially or entirely standing, according to tourist officials. They are threatened by neglect, decay or even demolition by new urban development.

"Lack of public awareness and the economic considerations by owners are the greatest threats to these buildings," said Ahmed al-Astal, director of Iwan, the history and heritage institute of Gaza's Islamic University. "These houses are our identity, but ignorance leads to their destruction."

Because the Gaza Strip is small, with 2 million people living in just 300 square kilometers (115 square miles), the experts and volunteers fear that structures of past centuries will disappear, like those from far more ancient civilizations.

Population growth, conflict with Israel and mismanagement by Hamas, the militant group that has run Gaza since 2007, have contributed to the erasure of many signs of Gaza's five millennia of history. The territory has been enriched by its prime location along the route connecting ancient Egypt, the Levant and Mesopotamia. For example, Hamas bulldozers destroyed large parts of a rare 4,500-year-old Bronze Age settlement to make way for a housing project.

Mobaderoon is one of a handful of organizations seeking to preserve ancient sites in Gaza City. But their efforts are typically limited in scope and lack systematic plans.

It took the team two weeks to remove the trash from the al-Kamalaia school, which is named after a Mamluk sultan. Each day, young men and women gather there, sweeping the dusty floor, brushing the bricks and supporting windows with wood frames.

Once the renovation is completed, al-Ruzzi says the goal is to convert the building into a venue for cultural and artistic activities because such facilities are few in Gaza.

"This is the only school that still maintains its architectural standing, it still has classrooms. It's clear that this school was used until a recent time in education and memorizing the Quran because it's in the old city," said Jamal Abu Rida, director of the archaeology department in Gaza's Tourism Ministry.

Residents of Gaza are preoccupied with financial woes, struggling with a 13-year-old Israeli-Egyptian blockade, and combatting a raging coronavirus outbreak that has overwhelmed the health system. Campaigns to protect heritage and archaeological sites are not top priorities, but are welcomed.

"The initiatives are very important because their goal is to preserve the cultural legacy," said al-Astal.

A few blocks from the school, a different team is working on renovating a house, the Ghussein palace, named after the family that has owned it for 200 years. The workers scraped the bricks to remove layers of dust that hid their features. Others took measurements for the door frames.

The work began on this home in August and is scheduled to be complete in January. "It was left for a long time and has a lot of cracks and problems," said Nashwa Ramlawi, the architect leading the restoration. "The place has a great heritage and cultural value. We will dedicate it for anything that serves the community; a cultural, service or social center open to everyone."

Trump golfs in Florida as COVID relief hangs in the balance

By JILL COLVIN Associated Press

PALM BEACH (AP) — After tossing a grenade that threatens to blow up a massive COVID relief and government funding bill and force a government shutdown in the midst of a pandemic, President Donald

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Trump spent his Christmas Eve golfing in Florida.

Failure to agree on the bill could deny checks to millions of Americans on the brink.

Trump had no events on his public schedule on the first day of his winter vacation Thursday, but traveled to his Palm Beach golf club, where he was spotted by CNN cameras on the links. Reporters were given no details of his schedule for the day, but told that, "As the Holiday season approaches, President Trump will continue to work tirelessly for the American People. His schedule includes many meetings and calls."

Trump's departure came as Washington was still reeling over his surprise, eleventh-hour demand that an end-of-year spending bill that congressional leaders spent months negotiating give most Americans \$2,000 COVID relief checks — far more than the \$600 members of his own party had agreed to. The idea was swiftly rejected by House Republicans during a rare Christmas Eve session, leaving the proposal in limbo.

The bipartisan compromise had been considered a done deal and had won sweeping approval in the House and Senate this week after the White House assured GOP leaders that Trump supported it. If Trump refuses to sign the deal, which is attached to a \$1.4 trillion government funding bill, it will force a federal government shutdown, in addition to delaying aid checks and halting unemployment benefits and eviction protections in the midst of the most dire stretch of the pandemic.

It was a final raised middle finger to Republicans from a president who has been raging over his Nov. 3 loss to President-elect Joe Biden and trying to come up with new, increasingly outrageous schemes to try to overturn the results of a Democratic election. He has been egged on by allies like his lawyer, former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani, who accompanied the president to Florida aboard Air Force One.

Trump's ire has been focused, in part, on Republicans in Congress whom he believes have been insufficiently supportive of his quest to delegitimize Biden's win by lobbing unfounded claims of mass voter fraud before Congress meets to tally the Electoral College votes on Jan. 6.

In Florida, Trump continued to rail against the results, complaining to members that he had been robbed of the election and voicing frustrations about the year-end spending bill.

"At a meeting in Florida today, everyone was asking why aren't the Republicans up in arms & fighting over the fact that the Democrats stole the rigged presidential election?" Trump tweeted after he'd returned to his private Mar-a-Lago club. "Especially in the Senate, they said, where you helped 8 Senators win their races."

"I will NEVER FORGET!" he wrote in another,

The statements underscored concerns that Trump is blowing up negotiations to punish lawmakers for what he sees as their insufficient support loyalty.

Trump has provided no credible evidence to support his election claims, which have also been refuted by a long list of officials, from former Attorney General William Barr to Republican governors, judges and local election administrators.

Meanwhile, the nation continues to reel as the coronavirus spreads, with record infections and hospitalizations and more than 327,000 now dead. And millions are now facing the prospect of spending the holidays alone or struggling to make ends meet without adequate income, food or shelter thanks to the pandemic's economic toll.

To mark the holiday, the president and first lady Melania Trump tweeted out a pre-recorded video message in which they wished Americans a Merry Christmas and thanked first responders and members of the military.

"As you know, this Christmas is different than years past," said Mrs. Trump, who focused on the acts of "kindness and courage" the pandemic had inspired.

Trump hailed the vaccine doses now being delivered and thanked those responsible. "It is a truly a Christmas miracle," he said.

Meanwhile, Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin have been trying to salvage the year-end legislation to try to prevent a shutdown. Democrats will recall House lawmakers to Washington for a vote Monday on Trump's \$2,000 proposal, though it would likely die in the GOP-controlled Senate. They are also considering a Monday vote on a stop-gap measure to at least avert a federal shutdown and keep the government running until Biden is inaugurated Jan. 20.

In addition to the relief checks, the COVID bill that passed would establish a temporary \$300 per week supplemental jobless benefit, provide a new round of subsidies for hard-hit businesses, restaurants and theaters and money for schools, and provide money for health care providers and to help with COVID vaccine distribution.

California deaths spur pleas to stay home for Christmas

By ROBERT JABLON Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — California's deadly Christmas was marked by pleas to stay away from holiday gatherings outside the home and indoor church services in what could be a make-or-break effort to curb a coronavirus surge that already has filled some hospitals well beyond normal capacity.

Festive gatherings with friends and family might be tempting after a year that has seen the pandemic take at least 23,635 lives and ravage the economy as much of the state remained under a stay-at-home order that has closed nonessential businesses.

But officials repeated warnings that Thanksgiving gatherings where people didn't wear masks or observe social distancing have resulted in a surge and begged people to forego Yule and New Year's festivities.

Gov. Gavin Newsom said hospitals are under "unprecedented pressure" and if current trends continue the number of those hospitalized because of the virus could double in 30 days.

"We could have a surge on top of surge on top of a surge in January and February," Newsom said in a social media video posting Thursday. "I fear that but we're not victims to that if we change our behaviors."

Coronavirus cases, hospitalizations and deaths have mounted exponentially in recent weeks and are breaking new records. On Christmas Eve, California became the first state in the nation to exceed 2 million confirmed COVID-19 cases.

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 topped 2 million.

The crisis is straining the state's medical system well beyond its normal capacity, prompting hospitals to treat patients in tents, offices and auditoriums.

As of Thursday, California had record numbers of COVID-19 patients in the hospital and in ICUs, at nearly 19,000 and nearly 4,000, respectively.

"In most hospitals about half of all of the beds are filled with COVID patients and half of all the ICU beds are filled with COVID patients, and two-thirds of these patients are suffocating due to the inflammation that's in their lungs that's caused by the virus," said Dr. Christina Ghaly, director of the Los Angeles County Department of Health Services.

"They're suffocating to the point that they can no longer breathe on their own, and they have to have someone put a tube down their throat, in order to oxygenate their organs. Many of these people will not live to be in 2021," she said.

Hospitals 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.

"Our systems are being overwhelmed, and the virus is spreading everywhere," said a statement from the Public Health Alliance of Southern California, which includes 10 neighboring local health departments covering nearly 60% of the state's population. "We understand that people are tired, but public health measures are not the enemy — they are the roadmap for a faster and more sustainable recovery."

Los Angeles County, which has accounted for a third of all coronavirus cases and nearly 40% of deaths, urged people to avoid attending indoor religious services, even though they are permitted with social distancing requirements.

The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles was permitting limited indoor services, although it also urged churches to avoid them in favor of outdoor or online services.

The Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels held Christmas Eve Masses and planned indoor Christmas Day Masses as well.

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On Thursday, dozens of physically spaced worshippers removed their masks only to take communion at arms' length from clergymen, and there was none of the singing that health officials warned could increase the spread.

Father David Gallardo held a copy of the children's book "How the Grinch Stole Christmas" in a midafternoon service as he taught that "darkness doesn't win," likening the coronavirus to the Grinch.

Amid the dire warnings were some rays of hope, which the governor said may indicate people are heeding pleas to social distance.

A statistical model that state officials have been using to project hospitalizations predicts more than 71,000 patients in one month's time — still an unsustainable four times the current number of patients but roughly 40,000 fewer than the same model had been projecting just days ago.

The transmission rate — the number of people that one infected person will in turn infect — has been slowing for nearly two weeks, and it is nearing the point that would bring fewer infections from each person who contracts the virus.

In addition, the rate of positive cases reached a new high of 12.4% over a two-week period, but it was starting to trend downward over the last seven days from a peak of 13.3% to 12.6%. The seven day rate was 12.1% on Thursday.

Newsom urged Californians to celebrate the holidays safely.

"Let's virtually hug those outside of our immediate family," he said. "Let's stay close to those folks in our household."

Associated Press Writers Don Thompson in Sacramento and Stefanie Dazio in Los Angeles and AP Photographer Ashley Landis in Los Angeles contributed to this story.

Chinese vaccines are poised to fill gap, but will they work?

By HUIZHONG WU Associated Press

TAIPEI, Taiwan (AP) — With rich countries snapping up supplies of COVID-19 vaccines, some parts of the world may have to rely on Chinese-developed shots to try to conquer the outbreak. The question: Will they work?

There is no outward reason to believe they won't, but China has a history of vaccine scandals, and its drugmakers have revealed little about their final human trials and the more than 1 million emergency-use inoculations they say have been carried out inside the country already.

Wealthy nations have reserved about 9 billion of the 12 billion mostly Western-developed shots expected to be produced next year, while COVAX, a global effort to ensure equal access to COVID-19 vaccines, has fallen short of its promised capacity of 2 billion doses.

For those countries that have not yet secured a vaccine, China may be the only solution.

China has six candidates in the last stage of trials and is one of the few nations that can manufacture vaccine on a large scale. Government officials have announced a capacity of 1 billion doses next year, with President Xi Jinping vowing China's vaccines will be a boon to the world.

The potential use of its vaccine by millions of people in other countries gives China an opportunity both to repair the damage to its reputation from an outbreak that escaped its borders and to show the world it can be a major scientific player.

Yet past scandals have damaged its own citizens' trust in its vaccines, with manufacturing and supply chain problems casting doubt on whether it can really be a savior.

"A question mark remains over how China can ensure the delivery of reliable vaccines," said Joy Zhang, a professor who studies the ethics of emerging science at the University of Kent in Britain. She cited China's "non-transparency over scientific data and a troubled history with vaccine delivery."

Bahrain last week became the second country to approve a Chinese COVID-19 vaccine, joining the United Arab Emirates. Morocco plans to use Chinese vaccines in a mass immunization campaign slated to start this month. Chinese vaccines are also awaiting approval in Turkey, Indonesia and Brazil, while testing

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continues in more than a dozen countries, including Russia, Egypt and Mexico.

In some countries, Chinese vaccines are viewed with suspicion. Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro has repeatedly sown doubt about the effectiveness of Chinese company Sinovac's vaccine candidate without citing any evidence, and said Brazilians won't be used as "guinea pigs."

Many experts praise China's vaccine capabilities.

"The studies look to be well done," said Jamie Triccas, head of immunology and infectious diseases at the University of Sydney's medical school, referring to clinical trial results published in scientific journals. "I wouldn't be overly concerned about that."

China has been building up its immunization programs for more than a decade. It has produced successful vaccines on a large scale for its own population, including vaccinations for measles and hepatitis, said Jin Dong-yan, a medical professor at the University of Hong Kong.

"There are no major outbreaks in China for any of these diseases," he said. "That means the vaccines are safe and effective."

China has worked with the Gates Foundation and others to improve manufacturing quality in the past decade. The World Health Organization has prequalified five non-COVID-19 Chinese vaccines, which allows U.N. agencies to buy them for other countries.

The companies whose products won prequalification include Sinovac and state-owned Sinopharm, both leading developers of COVID-19 vaccines.

Yet, the Wuhan Institute of Biological Products, a Sinopharm subsidiary behind one of the COVID-19 candidates, was caught up in a vaccine scandal in 2018.

Government inspectors found that the company, based in the city where the coronavirus was first detected last year, had made hundreds of thousands of ineffective doses of a combination vaccine for diphtheria, tetanus and whooping cough because of an equipment malfunction.

That same year it was reported that Changsheng Biotechnology Co. falsified data about a rabies vaccine.

In 2016, Chinese media revealed that 2 million doses of various vaccines for children had been improperly stored and sold throughout the country for years.

Vaccination rates fell after those scandals.

"All of my local Chinese friends, they're white-collar, they're well off, and none of them will buy medicine made in China. That's just the way it is," said Ray Yip, former country director of the Gates Foundation in China. He said he is one of the few who don't mind buying Chinese-made pharmaceuticals.

China revised its laws in 2017 and 2019 to tighten management of vaccine storage and step up inspections and penalties for faulty vaccines.

The country's major COVID-19 vaccine developers have published some scientific findings in peer-reviewed scientific journals. But international experts questioned how China recruited volunteers and what kind of tracking there was for possible side effects. Chinese companies and government officials haven't released details.

Now, after the release of data on the effectiveness of the Western-made vaccines developed by Pfizer and Moderna, experts are waiting to see the Chinese results. Regulators in the UAE, where a Sinopharm vaccine was tested, have said it appeared 86% effective based on interim clinical trial data. On Thursday, Turkey's government announced that Sinovac is 91.25% effective from interim data.

Sinopharm did not respond to a request for comment about the vaccine's efficacy data. Sinovac and CanSino, another Chinese vaccine company, did not respond to interview requests.

For some people in countries where the pandemic shows no signs of easing, a vaccine's nation of origin doesn't matter.

"I intend to take it, the first one that comes, if it goes right," said Daniel Alves Santos, a cook at a Rio de Janeiro restaurant. "And I hope God helps."

Associated Press writers David Biller in Rio de Janeiro and María Verza in Mexico City contributed to this report.

Coronavirus dampens Christmas joy in Bethlehem and elsewhere

By JOSEF FEDERMAN and JALAL HASSAN Associated Press

BETHLEHEM, West Bank (AP) — Bethlehem on Thursday ushered in Christmas Eve with a stream of joyous marching bands and the triumphant arrival of the top Catholic clergyman in the Holy Land, but few people were there to greet them as the coronavirus pandemic and a strict lockdown dampened 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. The Philippines prohibited mass gatherings and barred extended families from holding traditional Christmas Eve dinners. Traditional door-to-door children's carols were canceled in Greece.

On Christmas Eve in Italy, church bells rang earlier than usual. The Italian government's 10 p.m. curfew prompted pastors to move up services, with "Midnight" Mass starting Thursday evening in some churches as early as a couple hours after dark. Pope Francis, who has said people "must obey" civil authorities' measures to fight the spread of COVID-19, fell in line. This year, the Christmas vigil Mass in St. Peter's Basilica was moved up from 9:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.

Normally, seats at the vigil Mass are quickly snapped up, by Romans and by tourists, but the pandemic has reduced tourists in Italy to a trickle. In keeping with social distancing measures, barely 200 faithful — instead of several thousand — spaced out in the basilica's pews and wearing masks, attended Francis' celebration of the Mass. A row of fiery red poinsettia plants warmly contrasted with the sumptuous cold marble of the basilica.

Francis in his homily offered reflections on Christmas' significance. "We often hear it said that the greatest joy in life is the birth of a child. It is something extraordinary and it changes everything," he said. A child "makes us feel loved but can also teach us how to love."

"God was born a child in order to encourage us to care for others," said Francis, who has made attention to the poor and unjustly treated a key theme of his papacy.

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.

In Athens, Christmas Eve was eerily silent. In normal times, voices of children singing carols while tinkling metal triangles can be heard all day. The decades-old custom, in which children go house to house and receive small gifts, was banned this year. Groups of children managed to honor the tradition by singing to Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis by video link —including students from a school for children with hearing difficulty who performed in sign language.

Throughout the pandemic, one of the hardest-hit churches in New York City has been Saint Peter's Lutheran Church in Manhattan. Church leaders say more than 60 members of the congregation — which numbered about 800 before the pandemic — have died of COVID-19, almost all of them part of the community of some 400 who attended services in Spanish.

Despite their own heartbreaks, congregation members — many of them immigrants — donated coats, scarves and other winter clothes for more than 100 migrant minors at a detention center in Manhattan.

While many other New York City churches have resumed in-person services, Saint Peter's continues to offer its Masses only online. The schedule for Christmas Eve and Christmas day included Masses in English and Spanish, and a bilingual jazz vespers service.

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."

Raw, rainy weather added to the gloomy atmosphere, as several dozen people gathered in the central Manger Square to greet Latin Patriarch Pierbattista Pizzaballa. Youth marching bands playing Christmas carols on bagpipes, accompanied by pounding drummers, led a joyous procession ahead of the patriarch's arrival early in the afternoon.

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"Despite the restrictions and limitations we want to celebrate as much as possible, with family, community and joy," said Pizzaballa, who was to lead a small Midnight Mass gathering later in the evening. "We want to offer hope."

Thousands of foreign pilgrims usually flock to Bethlehem for the celebrations. But the closure of Israel's international airport to foreign tourists, along with Palestinian restrictions banning intercity travel in the areas they administer in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, kept visitors away.

The restrictions limited attendance to residents and a small entourage of religious officials. Evening celebrations, when pilgrims normally congregate around the Christmas tree, were canceled, and Midnight Mass was limited to clergy.

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.

In previous years, many Venezuelans have gone back home for the holidays to visit their relatives. But Colombia's government has shut down border crossings with Venezuela in a bid to slow down COVID-19 infections. Those who try to return home for the holidays must pay smugglers to get them back into Colombia.

Yakelin Tamaure, a nurse who left Venezuela two years ago to escape her nation's economic crisis, said that this year there will be no gifts, or new clothes for her two children, aged 10 and 15. She lives in a small house in Bogota, far from the city center but can barely cover rent. Tamaure said she hasn't been able to find work as a nurse because she still doesn't have a residence permit. Her parents are still in Venezuela.

"My mother broke her foot and can't walk properly so I'm worried about her" said Tamaure. "I try to send her money, but it's not the same as being there."

Rio de Janeiro's iconic beaches remained open, but a City Hall decree aimed at limiting gatherings prevented drivers from parking along the shore. Rain also kept beachgoers at home.

Thomas Azevedo and his 9-year-old son braved the bad weather to set up a small stand, selling beer and caipirinhas made from fresh fruit. By early afternoon, he hadn't sold a thing.

"It's not so much the rain; in previous years it was full of tourists at Christmas. This year there's no one," said Azevedo, 28.

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 after new cases were detected over the past week, states again closed their borders.

South Koreans woke up Christmas morning to learn that their coronavirus crisis has taken another turn for the worse as officials shut down ski resorts and national parks, restricted hotel occupancy and set fines for restaurants accepting large groups to arrest a viral surge that has spiked occupancy and deaths.

"The last week of the year that begins with Christmas is normally a time where people gather and share their affection with one another, but it's hard to see that this year in any parts of the world," Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun, the government's No. 2 behind President Moon Jae-in, said during a virus meeting.

Song Ju-hyeon, a resident in Paju, near Seoul, who is expecting a child in February, said home is the only place she feels safe as the virus continues to slam the capital area.

"It doesn't feel like Christmas anyway, there's no carols being played on the streets," she said. "There's so much transmission going on, and you just can't tell who's carrying the virus or not as it also spreads without symptoms. Christmas doesn't mean much anyway when it's this scary to go out."

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.

"People around us were tired, depressed and depleted, so we said let's just plant a drop of joy and love,"

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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. Associated Press writers from around the world contributed.

Heisman finalists: Tide teammates plus Lawrence and Trask

By RALPH D. RUSSO AP College Football Writer

Alabama teammates Mac Jones and DeVonta Smith along with Clemson's Trevor Lawrence and Florida's Kyle Trask have been named finalists for the Heisman Trophy.

The Heisman will be awarded Jan. 5 during a virtual ceremony. The coronavirus pandemic forced the cancellation of the usual trip to New York for the trophy presentation that comes with being a finalist.

Jones and Smith are the eighth set of teammates to be finalists together since the tradition started in 1982. Smith is trying to become the first wide receiver to win the Heisman since Michigan's Desmond Howard in 1991.

If it isn't Smith, who leads the nation in receptions (98) and receiving yards (1,511), the winner will be a quarterback for the 13th time in the last 15 years.

Jones leads the nation in efficiency rating (202.34), completion percentage (76.5) and yards per pass (11.4), with 32 touchdown passes.

The top-ranked Crimson Tide will play No. 4 Notre Dame in the College Football Playoff semifinals on Jan. 1.

Jones or Smith would become Alabama's third Heisman winner. Running backs Mark Ingram (2009) and Derrick Henry (2015) were the Tide's first Heisman winners.

Lawrence was the preseason favorite to win the award, but missing two games after contracting COVID-19 slowed his campaign. The junior quarterback and presumptive first selection in the next NFL draft did not play against Boston College and at Notre Dame.

He did play in Atlantic Coast Conference championship rematch against the Fighting Irish last weekend and led the Tigers to a blowout victory. On the season, Lawrence has thrown for 2,753 yards and 22 touchdowns in nine games, helping Clemson reach the playoff for the third time in his career.

No. 2 Clemson plays No. 3 Ohio State in the Sugar Bowl semifinals on Jan. 1. Lawrence would be the Tigers' first Heisman winner.

Trask leads the country with 43 touchdown passes and 4,125 yards. The senior is trying to join Steve Spurrier, Danny Wuerffel and Tim Tebow as Heisman-winning quarterback from Florida.

The rest of the top 10 was revealed in order, starting with Alabama running back Najee Harris. The Crimson Tide is the second team to have three players in the top five in Heisman voting.

In 1946, Army running back Glenn Davis won the Heisman, fellow running back Doc Blanchard finished fourth and quarterback Arnold Tucker was fifth.

Iowa State running back Breece Hall was sixth this year, followed by Ohio State quarterback Justin Fields, BYU quarterback Zach Wilson, Notre Dame quarterback Ian Book and Florida tight end Kyle Pitts.

Pitts is the first tight end to finish in the top 10 of the Heisman voting since Notre Dame's Ken MacAfee was third in 1977.

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Trump golfs in Florida as COVID relief hangs in the balance

By JILL COLVIN Associated Press

PALM BEACH (AP) — After tossing a grenade that threatens to blow up a massive COVID relief and

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government funding bill and force a government shutdown in the midst of a pandemic, President Donald Trump spent his Christmas Eve golfing in Florida.

Failure to agree on the bill could deny checks to millions of Americans on the brink.

Trump had no events on his public schedule on the first day of his winter vacation Thursday, but traveled to his Palm Beach golf club, where he was spotted by CNN cameras on the links. Reporters were given no details of his schedule for the day, but told that, "As the Holiday season approaches, President Trump will continue to work tirelessly for the American People. His schedule includes many meetings and calls."

Trump's departure came as Washington was still reeling over his surprise, eleventh-hour demand that an end-of-year spending bill that congressional leaders spent months negotiating give most Americans \$2,000 COVID relief checks — far more than the \$600 members of his own party had agreed to. The idea was swiftly rejected by House Republicans during a rare Christmas Eve session, leaving the proposal in limbo.

The bipartisan compromise had been considered a done deal and had won sweeping approval in the House and Senate this week after the White House assured GOP leaders that Trump supported it. If Trump refuses to sign the deal, which is attached to a \$1.4 trillion government funding bill, it will force a federal government shutdown, in addition to delaying aid checks and halting unemployment benefits and eviction protections in the midst of the most dire stretch of the pandemic.

It was a final raised middle finger to Republicans from a president who has been raging over his Nov. 3 loss to President-elect Joe Biden and trying to come up with new, increasingly outrageous schemes to try to overturn the results of a Democratic election. He has been egged on by allies like his lawyer, former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani, who accompanied the president to Florida aboard Air Force One.

Trump's ire has been focused, in part, on Republicans in Congress whom he believes have been insufficiently supportive of his quest to delegitimize Biden's win by lobbing unfounded claims of mass voter fraud before Congress meets to tally the Electoral College votes on Jan. 6.

In Florida, Trump continued to rail against the results, complaining to members that he had been robbed of the election and voicing frustrations about the year-end spending bill.

"At a meeting in Florida today, everyone was asking why aren't the Republicans up in arms & fighting over the fact that the Democrats stole the rigged presidential election?" Trump tweeted after he'd returned to his private Mar-a-Lago club. "Especially in the Senate, they said, where you helped 8 Senators win their races."

"I will NEVER FORGET!" he wrote in another,

The statements underscored concerns that Trump is blowing up negotiations to punish lawmakers for what he sees as their insufficient support loyalty.

Trump has provided no credible evidence to support his election claims, which have also been refuted by a long list of officials, from former Attorney General William Barr to Republican governors, judges and local election administrators.

Meanwhile, the nation continues to reel as the coronavirus spreads, with record infections and hospitalizations and more than 327,000 now dead. And millions are now facing the prospect of spending the holidays alone or struggling to make ends meet without adequate income, food or shelter thanks to the pandemic's economic toll.

To mark the holiday, the president and first lady Melania Trump tweeted out a pre-recorded video message in which they wished Americans a Merry Christmas and thanked first responders and members of the military.

"As you know, this Christmas is different than years past," said Mrs. Trump, who focused on the acts of "kindness and courage" the pandemic had inspired.

Trump hailed the vaccine doses now being delivered and thanked those responsible. "It is a truly a Christmas miracle," he said.

Meanwhile, Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin have been trying to salvage the year-end legislation to try to prevent a shutdown. Democrats will recall House lawmakers to Washington for a vote Monday on Trump's \$2,000 proposal, though it would likely die in the GOP-controlled Senate. They are also considering a Monday vote on a stop-gap measure to at least avert

a federal shutdown and keep the government running until Biden is inaugurated Jan. 20.

In addition to the relief checks, the COVID bill that passed would establish a temporary \$300 per week supplemental jobless benefit, provide a new round of subsidies for hard-hit businesses, restaurants and theaters and money for schools, and provide money for health care providers and to help with COVID vaccine distribution.

US military confirms pandemic won't sideline Santa Claus

By PATTY NIEBERG Associated Press/Report for America

DENVER (AP) — The U.S. military is tracking an elderly man with a white beard and a large belly who goes by the name of Saint Nicholas.

There's no reason for alarm though, Air Force Gen. Glen D. VanHerck said.

In fact, this is a Christmas tradition going on its 65th year. The North American Aerospace Defense Command, a joint U.S.-Canadian operation that protects the skies over both countries, has tracked the fabled jolly old man since a child mistakenly called the base in 1955, asking to speak to Santa.

The base in Colorado Springs, Colorado, used to monitor for signs of a nuclear attack. But this year, officers at the base are making sure the coronavirus pandemic won't sideline Santa Claus and his reindeer from, as the storybooks say, delivering gifts to children around the world.

While the Santa tracking operations center usually has around 1,500 volunteers fielding calls from around the world, this year they have scaled back because of COVID-19 concerns with few people in the center and many taking calls remotely. With the smaller operation, they have also added a voicemail for callers who don't reach an operator.

But as cases continue to rise across the globe, it begs the question: Will Santa be able to bring our gifts to us safely?

"Santa Claus has been doing this for many, many years, as you know, and he's been through pandemics before and challenges all around the globe. I'm one hundred percent confident that Santa Claus knows exactly how to stay safe," VanHerck said.

Despite a unique Christmas season, the NORAD Commander said they don't expect any disruptions to the storybook Santa's schedule.

"We expect Santa Claus will be on time, arrives somewhere between 9:00 p.m. and midnight to each house. I would encourage all children to make sure they're in bed by 9:00 p.m. so Santa Claus can stay on time," he said.

His other important message: You can still leave out cookies.

This is VanHerck's first year tracking Santa. The commander said it's an honor to be able to interact with people from around the world and be part of a tradition that spans generations.

"Prior to being the Commander of NORAD, I didn't have an idea of really how popular this really is and how many people have done this for decades from the time they were children until now," VanHerck said. "And so to continue that tradition is really important."

VanHerck said he hopes that tracking Santa will bring happiness to families during an unprecedented holiday season and after months of being stuck at home — especially for children attending school remotely and unable to see their friends because of COVID-19.

"We hope it brings some normalcy to their lives and some cheer during the holiday season," VanHerck said. "So as much as we can bring good tidings, enjoyment to the family and all the children — it'll be a big success."

To get live updates on Santa's location, families can call 1-877-HI-NORAD (1-877-446-6723) and visit noradsanta.org.

Nieberg is a corps member for the Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.

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 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.

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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.

Dark days: Experts fear the holidays will fuel the US crisis

By STEFANIE DAZIO and TAMARA LUSH Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Hard-hit California eclipsed 2 million coronavirus cases on Christmas Eve as the U.S. headed into a holiday season of travel and family gatherings that threaten to fuel the deadly outbreak across the nation.

Despite warnings from public health experts to stay home, over 1.19 million travelers passed through U.S. airport security checkpoints Wednesday — down by about 40% from a year ago, but the highest one-day total since the crisis took hold in mid-March.

Airports also recorded around 1 million travelers on each of the five days between last Friday and Tuesday.

Ember McCauley, a 21-year-old nursing student at Missouri Western in St. Joseph, was headed Tuesday from Kansas City, Missouri, to Austin, Texas, to go wedding dress shopping with a cousin, who is getting married in November. She was returning home on Christmas Eve.

She said she was "kind of" anxious about traveling during the pandemic. But she added: "I feel like I eat healthy and I take a lot of precautions, like sanitizing and washing my hands and wearing my mask all the time. I feel like I will be OK, even if something does happen."

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the government's top infectious-disease expert, said he is particularly worried about travel between Christmas and New Year's. Fauci, who turned 80 on Thursday, said he and his wife would be celebrating his birthday and the holidays with their children on Zoom.

"We have a big problem," Fauci told The Washington Post. "Look at the numbers — the numbers are

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really quite dramatic.”

The virus has taken more than 327,000 lives in the U.S., with over 3,000 deaths per day repeatedly recorded over the past two weeks.

“We’re in a very very difficult situation right now. People are just not paying attention to public health guidelines, and the evidence for that is in the number of people traveling for the Christmas holiday,” said Dr. Lee Harrison, a professor of medicine and epidemiology at the University of Pittsburgh.

Americans have high hopes for vaccines — officials had promised that some 20 million people would be vaccinated by year’s end. But as of Wednesday, about 1.1 million Americans had received the first dose of the two-dose inoculations, yet another disappointment in a year of many.

On Thursday, California became the first state to record 2 million confirmed coronavirus infections, reaching the milestone on Christmas Eve as close to the entire state was under a strict stay-at-home order and hospitals struggled to cope with the biggest crush of cases since the pandemic began.

The first COVID-19 case in California was confirmed Jan. 25. It took 292 days to reach 1 million cases on Nov. 11. It took 44 days to get to the next million.

California, the most populous state, has recorded more than 23,000 COVID-19 deaths. Its confirmed infection rate — cases per 100,000 people — is lower than the U.S. average, but its nearly 40 million residents mean the outbreak outpaces that of other states in sheer numbers. More than 18,000 people are in the hospital, and many intensive care units are filled.

“Watching them suffer is hard,” said Melanie LaMadrid, a nurse at Providence Holy Cross Medical Center in Los Angeles’ San Fernando Valley.

Nurses are exhausted, terrified of what’s next and angry at those who ignore pleas to stay home and stay safe.

“I wish they could just walk down our unit for a day and look at the faces of some of these patients,” said Holy Cross nurse Jenny Carrillo, her voice breaking.

Lush reported from St. Petersburg, Florida. Associated Press writers Heather Hollingsworth in Kansas City, Missouri, and Shelley Adler in Fairfax, Virginia, contributed to this story.

GOP blocks \$2,000 checks as Trump leaves COVID aid in chaos

By LISA MASCARO and ANDREW TAYLOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump’s sudden demand for \$2,000 checks for most Americans was swiftly rejected by House Republicans on Thursday as his haphazard actions throw a massive COVID relief and government funding bill into chaos.

The rare Christmas Eve session of the House lasted just minutes, with help for millions of Americans awaiting Trump’s signature on the bill. Unemployment benefits, eviction protections and other emergency aid, including smaller \$600 checks, are at risk. Trump’s refusal of the \$900 billion package, which is linked to \$1.4 trillion government funds bill, could spark a federal shutdown at midnight Monday.

“We’re not going to let the government shut down, nor are we going to let the American people down,” said Rep. Steny Hoyer, D-Md., the majority leader.

The optics appear terrible for Republicans, and the outgoing president, as the nation suffers through the worst holiday season many can remember. Families are isolated under COVID precautions and millions of American households are devastated without adequate income, food or shelter. The virus death toll of 327,000-plus is rising.

Trump is ending his presidency much the way he started it — sowing confusion and reversing promises all while contesting the election and courting a federal shutdown over demands his own party in Congress will not meet.

The congressional Republican leaders have been left almost speechless by Trump’s year-end scorching of their work.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy helped negotiate

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the year-end deal, a prized bipartisan compromise, that won sweeping approval this week in the House and Senate after the White House assured GOP leaders that Trump supported it.

Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin boasted that the \$600 checks all sides had agreed to for Americans would be in the mail in a week.

Instead, Washington is now hurtling toward a crisis with COVID aid about to collapse, as the president is at his Mar-a-Lago club. He has been lashing out at GOP leaders for refusing to join his efforts to overturn the election that Joe Biden won when the Electoral College votes are tallied in Congress on Jan. 6.

"The best way out of this is for the president to sign the bill," Republican Sen. Roy Blunt of Missouri said Thursday. "And I still hope that's what he decides."

Racing to salvage the year-end legislation, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Mnuchin are in talks on options.

Democrats will recall House lawmakers to Washington for a vote Monday on Trump's proposal, with a roll call that would put all members on record as supporting or rejecting the \$2,000 checks. They are also considering a Monday vote on a stop-gap measure to at least avert a federal shutdown. It would keep the government running until Biden is inaugurated Jan. 20. Lawmakers will also be asked to override Trump's veto of a must-pass Defense bill.

After presiding over the short House session, an exasperated Rep. Debbie Dingell, D-Mich., decried the possibility that the COVID assistance may collapse.

"It is Christmas Eve, but it is not a silent night. All is not calm. For too many, nothing is bright," she said on Capitol Hill.

A town hall she hosted the night before "had people crying, people terrified of what is going to happen," she said. One father recently told her he had to tell his children there would be no Santa Claus this year.

The president's push to increase direct payments for most Americans from \$600 to \$2,000 for individuals and \$4,000 for couples drives support from Democrats but splits the GOP with a politically difficult test of their loyalty to the president.

Republican lawmakers traditionally balk at the big spending, never fully embracing Trump's populist approach. Many have opposed larger \$2,000 checks as too costly and poorly targeted.

On a conference call Wednesday 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 GOP leaders to hit the cable news shows to explain its benefits, the person said.

Yet the president has found common ground with Democrats, particularly leading liberals who support the \$2,000 payments as the best way to help struggling Americans. Democrats only settled for the lower number to compromise with Republicans.

Even if the House is able to approve Trump's \$2,000 checks on Monday, that measure would likely die in the GOP-controlled Senate, which is due back in session on Tuesday.

The president's unpredictable demands are creating more Trump-related headaches for Georgia GOP Sens. Kelly Loeffler and David Perdue, who are fighting for their political lives — and for continued GOP control of the Senate — in a pair of Jan. 5 Georgia run-off elections. They are being forced to choose whether to back or buck Trump, potentially angering voters on all sides.

The clash Thursday unfolded as the Democratic-controlled House convened for a routine pro forma session, which had been scheduled before Trump's sudden moves, when lawmakers anticipated no business being conducted.

Instead, the 12-minute House session morphed into a procedural brawl as Hoyer, the No. 2 House Democrat, sought the unanimous approval of all House members to pass the bill with Trump's proposal. GOP leader Kevin McCarthy, who was not present in the nearly-empty chamber, refused.

House Republicans then tried, and failed, to win unanimous approval of their own proposal to revisit routine foreign aid funding, which Trump had cited as one of his key objections to the overall spending package.

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The year-end package Trump railed against as a “disgrace” is the product of months of work. It 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. Money is included for health care providers and to help with COVID vaccine distribution. Trump took aim at foreign aid funds in the package he has agreed to in the past and asked for in his yearly budget.

The final text of the more than 5,000-page bill required days to be compiled but Pelosi announced Thursday that it was completed and being sent to the White House for Trump’s signature.

The year-end timing complicates the schedule ahead. Even if Trump doesn’t formally veto the package, he could allow it to expire with a “pocket veto” at the end of the congressional session.

The Senate cleared the huge relief package Monday 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.

Breakthrough: UK and EU reach post-Brexit trade agreement

By RAF CASERT and JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — Just a week before the deadline, Britain and the European Union struck a free-trade deal Thursday that should avert economic chaos on New Year’s and bring a measure of certainty for businesses after years of Brexit turmoil.

Once ratified by both sides, the agreement will ensure Britain and the 27-nation bloc can continue to trade in goods without tariffs or quotas after the U.K. breaks fully free of the EU on Jan. 1.

Relief was palpable all around that nine months of tense and often testy negotiations had finally produced a positive result.

The Christmas Eve breakthrough was doubly welcome amid a coronavirus pandemic that has left some 70,000 people in Britain dead and led the country’s neighbors to shut their borders to the U.K. over a new and seemingly more contagious variant of the virus circulating in England.

“We have taken back control of our laws and our destiny,” declared British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who posted a picture of himself on social media, beaming with thumbs up.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said: “It was a long and winding road, but we have got a good deal to show for it.”

“It is fair, it is a balanced deal, and it is the right and responsible thing to do for both sides,” she said in Brussels.

The EU member countries and the British and European parliaments still need to vote on the agreement, though action by the European body may not happen until after the Jan. 1 breakup. Britain’s Parliament is set to vote Dec. 30.

France, long seen as Britain’s toughest obstacle to a deal, said the uncanny steadfastness among the 27 nations with widely varying interests was a triumph in itself.

“European unity and firmness paid off,” French President Emmanuel Macron said in a statement.

And German Chancellor Angela Merkel said that unity will now probably result in all the EU nations backing the deal: “I am very optimistic that we can present a good result here.”

It has been 4 1/2 years since Britons voted 52% to 48% to leave the EU and — in the words of the Brexiteers’ 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 last January. Disentangling the two sides’ economies and reconciling Britain’s desire for independence with the EU’s aim of preserving its unity took months longer.

The devil will be in the detail of the 2,000-page agreement, but both sides claimed the deal protects their cherished goals. Britain said it gives the U.K. control over its money, borders, laws and fishing grounds and ensures the country is “no longer in the lunar pull of the EU.”

Von der Leyen said it protects the EU’s single market and contains safeguards to ensure Britain does not unfairly undercut the bloc’s standards.

If Britain were to quit the EU with no agreement governing trade, the two sides would reinstate tariffs

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on each other's goods.

Johnson's government acknowledged that a chaotic no-deal exit — or a "crash-out," as the British call it — would probably cause gridlock at the country's ports, temporary shortages of some goods and higher food prices. The turmoil could also cost hundreds of thousands of jobs.

To avoid that, negotiating sessions alternating between London and Brussels — and sometimes disrupted by the pandemic — gradually whittled differences between the two sides down to three key issues: fair-competition rules, mechanisms for resolving future disputes, and fishing rights.

The EU has long feared that Britain would slash social, environmental and state aid rules after Brexit and gain a competitive advantage over the EU. Britain denies planning to institute weaker standards but said that having to follow EU regulations would undermine its sovereignty.

A compromise was eventually reached on the tricky "level playing field" issues. That left the economically minor but hugely symbolic issue of fishing rights as the final sticking point, with maritime EU nations seeking to retain access to U.K. waters where they have long fished.

Under the deal, the EU will give up a quarter of the quota it catches in U.K. waters, far less than the 80% Britain initially demanded. The system will be phased in over 5 1/2 years, after which the quotas will be reassessed.

The U.K. has remained part of the EU's single market and customs union during the 11-month post-Brexit transition period. As a result, many people so far have noticed little impact from Brexit.

On Jan. 1, the breakup will start feeling real. Even with a trade deal, goods and people will no longer be able to move freely between the U.K. and its continental neighbors without border restrictions.

EU citizens will no longer be able to live and work in Britain without visas -- though that does not apply to the 4 million already doing so -- and Britons can no longer automatically work or retire in EU nations. Exporters and importers face customs declarations, goods checks and other obstacles.

British manufacturers and traders welcomed the certainty provided by the deal. But economists said other parts of the economy — especially Britain's huge services sector — would be left out in the cold.

David Henig, a trade expert at the European Center for International Political Economy, said Jan. 1 marked "the end of seamless trade between the U.K. and the EU."

"And the difference that a trade deal makes is not going to be obvious to most people from that," he said. "It is the new barriers that people will notice much more."

The U.K.-EU border is already reeling from new restrictions placed on travelers from Britain into France and other European countries because of the new version of the coronavirus sweeping through London and southern England.

Thousands of trucks were stuck in traffic jams near the port of Dover on Wednesday, waiting for their drivers to get virus tests so they could enter the Eurotunnel to France. British supermarkets said the backlog will take days to clear and there could be shortages of some fresh produce over the holiday season.

Despite the deal, there are still unanswered questions about huge areas, including security cooperation between the U.K. and the bloc — with the U.K. set to lose access to real-time information in some EU law-enforcement databases — and access to the EU market for Britain's huge financial services sector.

Von der Leyen said she felt "quiet satisfaction," but no joy, now that the torrid Brexit saga that has consumed Britain and the EU for years is finally almost over.

"I know this is a difficult day for some, and to our friends in the United Kingdom I want to say parting is such sweet sorrow," she said.

Johnson, who staked his career and reputation on extracting the country from the EU, said Britain will always be a strong friend and partner to the bloc.

"Although we have left the EU, this country will remain, culturally, emotionally, historically, strategically, geologically attached to Europe," he said.

Lawless reported from London.

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

NOT REAL NEWS: A look at what didn't happen this week

By ALI SWENSON, ARIJETA LAJKA and JUDE JOFFE-BLOCK Associated Press

Here's a look at false and misleading claims circulating online as news about COVID-19 vaccines and uncertainty around coronavirus relief in the U.S. dominate headlines. None of these are legit, even though they were shared widely on social media. The Associated Press checked them out. Here are the facts:

No, a Tennessee nurse didn't die after getting the vaccine

CLAIM: Tiffany Dover, a nurse manager in Chattanooga, Tennessee, who fainted after receiving her first dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine on Thursday, is now dead.

THE FACTS: Claims of Dover's death have no basis in reality. She is alive and worked a shift at CHI Memorial Hospital on Monday, according to Lisa McCluskey, the hospital's vice president of marketing communications. The claim emerged on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube over the weekend following videos that showed the nurse fainting on Dec. 17 several minutes after receiving the vaccine. It also appeared on Reddit, on a subreddit devoted to conspiracy theories, and on a website claiming to show obituaries of deceased people. Some posts used screenshots of Dover's Facebook and Instagram accounts to claim she must be dead because she hadn't posted in several days. Others shared screenshots from a public records website, suggesting the appearance of Dover's name in search results somehow indicated she had died. These claims are bogus, McCluskey confirmed to The Associated Press. Dover told reporters after the fainting episode that she has a condition that can cause her to faint when she feels pain. "It's common for me," she told reporters. "I feel fine now." In the days since then, CHI Memorial Hospital has confirmed Dover is doing well, sharing multiple tweets and a video of the nurse posing with colleagues on Monday afternoon. The CDC offers guidance on fainting after vaccination, which can be common. It says that although fainting has a variety of possible causes, "it is usually triggered by pain or anxiety."

—Ali Swenson

Doctor who vaccinated Pelosi didn't leave cap on syringe

CLAIM: Photos of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi getting the first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine show that the doctor never removed the orange cap from the syringe, so she never actually received the shot.

THE FACTS: The doctor did not leave a cap on the syringe when Pelosi received her first dose of the two-part Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine on Dec. 18 in front of reporters. Photos and news reports clearly document every step of the process, from the moment Capitol physician Dr. Brian Monahan administered the shot to Pelosi posing with her vaccine card afterward. However, over the weekend, social media users began to share baseless theories that the doctor never removed an orange cap from the syringe, so Pelosi was not actually vaccinated. "Hard to get a shot with the cap still on," read one post that circulated widely last weekend. "What in the Sam hill is going on here?" read another. "I want to be like Nancy Pelosi and get the vaccine with the cap on it too!" Some of the posts included photos that showed an orange section near the end of the syringe. However, that orange section is not a cap. Photos prove that; they show the needle emerging past it toward Pelosi's arm. Instead, the orange piece is more likely the needle hub, a plastic piece that attaches the syringe to the needle. Pelosi acknowledged in a tweet that she received the first dose of the vaccine, saying, "Today, with confidence in science & at the direction of the Office of the Attending Physician, I received the COVID-19 vaccine."

—Ali Swenson

Photo of Pelosi at indoor gathering was taken last January

CLAIM: A photo shows Nancy Pelosi at an indoor party, defying COVID-19 restrictions.

THE FACTS: A photo of Pelosi at a gathering that was taken last January, before the U.S. introduced strict COVID-19 restrictions, was shared widely in recent weeks on Facebook with a false description. In

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reality, the out-of-focus photo shows Pelosi gesturing to a crowd at the opening party for Danny Meyer's Maialino Mare, an Italian restaurant in Washington's Navy Yard. Anna Spiegel, a food editor at Washingtonian magazine, took the photo on Jan. 7 and posted it that day on Twitter. That same image, however, was reposted more recently with the false claim that it shows Pelosi flouting social-distancing requirements. "Ladies and Gentlemen here's your speaker of the house enjoying a party after she tells you you can't have social gatherings," states a false post on Facebook. Several Facebook users reposted the same false claim, sharing it thousands of times. It was also shared on Parler, a social media platform that's popular among some conservatives. "Taken 3 days ago," wrote one Facebook user who shared the false post last week. The post had over 2,400 shares. In fact, it was taken nearly a year ago, before restrictions around mask-wearing and social-distancing had been introduced. In March, the CDC recommended that gatherings of 50 or more people be canceled or postponed. D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser issued an order on March 24 requiring non-essential businesses to temporarily close and prohibiting the gathering of 10 or more people.

—Arijeta Lajka

No, Congress did not give itself a pay raise this year

CLAIM: Members of Congress gave themselves more than \$40,000 in pay raises this year while only giving Americans \$1,200 checks and voting to give just \$600 more.

THE FACTS: Congress did not give itself a pay raise this year. The Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act signed by President Donald Trump in late March awarded \$1,200 stimulus checks to most Americans. As news spread this week that Congress had passed a \$900 billion year-end COVID relief package that would give \$600 direct payments to those earning up to \$75,000, a popular post on Facebook falsely claimed members of Congress had given themselves massive pay raises of more than \$40,000. "They gave you \$1200... six months later they'll give you \$600...in the same year they gave themselves \$40k + pay raises," reads the widely shared post. It concludes: "Are you pissed off yet? You should be." House Appropriations Committee spokesperson Evan Hollander confirmed to The Associated Press that congressional salaries did not go up this year. "In fact, the legislation just passed specifically blocks the COLA that would otherwise have taken effect," Hollander said, referring to an automatic "cost of living adjustment" in pay. Members of Congress have not received that adjustment since 2009. President Donald Trump has suggested he won't sign the bipartisan COVID relief bill unless the stimulus payments are increased from \$600 to \$2,000. Most senators and members of the U.S. House earn an annual salary of \$174,000. The speaker of the House earns \$223,500, and the president pro tempore of the Senate and the majority and minority leaders in the House and Senate earn \$193,400. The false claim that Congress gave itself a raise also circulated online in March, when Congress passed the CARES Act.

—Jude Joffe-Block

Biden family does not own Dominion Voting Systems

CLAIM: President-elect Joe Biden's sister is married to Stephen Owens, the co-founder of the private equity firm Staple Street Capital, which owns Dominion Voting Systems.

THE FACTS: Dominion Voting Systems has been a target of a litany of false fraud claims since the 2020 election, and the latest theory that attempts to link the president-elect to the company is also bogus. Stephen Owens has no relationship to the Biden family, a spokesperson for Staple Street Capital confirmed. This false claim is based on two people sharing a common last name. "Biden's sister is married to Stephen Owens, who owns Dominion Voting Systems," read Facebook posts viewed hundreds of thousands of times this week. Another variation of the claim suggested an even more tenuous connection. "Valerie Biden Owens (Joe's sister) is married to John Owens," a Facebook post read. "His brother, Kevin Owens, is founder of Staple Street Investors, which owns Dominion Voting." It's true that the president-elect's sister is married to a man named John Owens, according to a New York Times wedding announcement from 1975. According to the Times, the groom's brother, R. Kevin Owens, was the best man. But Stephen Owens bears no relation to either of these individuals, according to Tony Fratto, a partner with the PR firm Hamilton Place Strategies who spoke to The Associated Press on behalf of Staple Street Capital and

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Dominion. Fratto said Staple Street Capital co-founder Stephen Owens has no relationship with the Biden family. In a fact-checking page on its website, Dominion says that it is not affiliated with or owned by any political figures or political parties.

—Ali Swenson

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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.

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 2 million cases recorded in California since the pandemic began.

Close to 19,000 people were hospitalized in the state Wednesday, 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 hit 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

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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. “I wish they could just walk down our unit for a day and look at the faces of some of these patients,” Carillo said.

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.”

Surging virus, plummeting temperatures challenge shelters

By GILLIAN FLACCUS and MICHAEL HILL Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — After three years on the streets, Tiecha Vannoy and her boyfriend Chris Foss plan to weather the pandemic this winter in a small white “pod” with electricity, heat and enough room for two.

Portland this month assembled neat rows of the shelters, which resemble garden sheds, in three ad-hoc “villages” — part of an unprecedented effort unfolding in cold-weather cities nationwide to keep people without permanent homes safe as temperatures drop and coronavirus cases surge.

“We just get to stay in our little place. We don’t have to leave here unless we want to,” said Vannoy, wiping away tears as they moved into the shelter near a downtown train station. “It’s been a long time coming. He always tells me to have faith, but I was just over it.”

The pandemic has caught homeless service providers in a crosscurrent: demand is high but their ability to provide services is constricted. Shelter operators who already cut capacity to meet social distance requirements face new stresses with winter looming. Coming in from the cold can now mean spending a night in a warehouse, an old Greyhound bus station, schools or an old jail.

And people experiencing homelessness face difficult choices. Many are hesitant to enter the reduced number of spaces available to escape the cold for fear of catching the virus.

“Those (are) folks who would under normal circumstances maybe come into a drop-in center to warm up, or go into the subway to warm up, or go into a McDonald’s to warm up — and just not having those options available to them. What then?” asked Giselle Routhier of the Coalition for the Homeless in New York City.

By some projections, coronavirus cases will increase into January, when longer cold snaps tend to increase demand for shelter. With the extension of a federal eviction moratorium that ends Dec. 31 in limbo, housing advocates predict up to 23 million Americans could lose their housing.

With more space needed, providers have gotten creative.

In Troy, New York, Joseph’s House and Shelter is renting 19 rooms in an old convent for a seasonal shelter. The Poverello Center in Missoula, Montana, cut its capacity by half in April and scrambled to add 150 socially distant beds at a new winter shelter in a warehouse. Portland opened new shelters in a former Greyhound bus station and an unused jail and is renting out 300 rooms at six motels in addition to the 100 pods.

Pallet, the company that makes the 64- or 100-square-foot pods, said it has provided 1,500 beds to cities and towns across the U.S. since the pandemic began.

Vannoy and Foss were terrified to stay in crowded shelters and worried about the safety of collecting used soda cans for change. Charities they’d relied on for hot lunches, free clothes and warm showers

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closed. At one point, Foss went a month without changing clothes. Now, they have a safe space.

"People just locked themselves in the house, I get it," Foss said of the sudden dearth of services. "But it really made it dirty and nasty and you really had to put your own instincts for survival into high gear."

Many localities are using federal CARES Act money to increase winter shelter options for people amid COVID-19 — and some say the solutions provide a glimpse of what would be possible with more consistent, long-term funding.

Portland is paying \$1 million a month to rent the motel rooms for homeless people at high-risk of COVID complications. In Delaware, a former 192-room Sheraton Hotel purchased for \$19.5 million by New Castle County for use as an emergency shelter opened last week.

"There's something a little poetic about taking a pretty nice hotel and putting the most vulnerable individuals up in those hotels to see if we can transition them to something different," said County Executive Matt Meyer.

In Ithaca, New York, advocates have expanded outreach to encampments and other places where people are sheltering.

When Jose Ortiz tested positive for the coronavirus last month, he was able to isolate at his elaborately crafted shelter in "The Jungle," a patch of woods on the city's outskirts where dozens of people settle in tents and more permanent structures. Advocates brought him food, water, a propane heater and cough drops as they kept tabs on him, said Deb Wilke, homeless crisis alleviation coordinator at Second Wind Cottages.

"This is my home, so this is where I want to be," Ortiz said outside his camp, complete with a tarp-covered "treehouse" built waist-high off the ground, "and they were pretty good at making sure that I had whatever I needed."

The encampment is served by the Christian ministry Loaves & Fishes, which boxes up about 250 lunches or dinners a day for delivery around the area. Meanwhile, more staff are being hired this winter for telemedicine services launched by the non-profit REACH Medical.

"I think it'll be a bit more work trudging through snow on top of mud," said REACH community health worker Matt Dankanich, who makes regular rounds through the wooded encampment with a nurse. He can connect people with doctors and other providers through encrypted video calls.

Still, despite masks and distancing, outbreaks have hobbled some operations.

An outbreak that started during Thanksgiving at the Union Gospel Mission in Portland eventually sickened 18 people in transitional housing. As a result, the organization temporarily closed its doors, stopped daily meal distribution, shut down its thrift shop and briefly shuttered another winter shelter. The mission has since rebounded and is preparing to serve more than 1,000 Christmas meals.

In Missoula, coronavirus outbreaks have sent one-third of The Poverello Center's staff into quarantine twice already. Meanwhile, the motel purchased by the city for shelter is full nearly every day, said executive director Amy Allison Thompson.

In Ithaca, Ortiz's health has improved. Others in the encampments are expected to seek shelter in the city when temperatures become bone-chilling. But he's reluctant to leave behind his "cozy" place in the woods.

"All my things are here. My home is here," he said. "So it's hard for me to just pick up and leave."

Hill reported from Ithaca, New York.

VIRUS TODAY: Relief bill in limbo, California hits 2M cases

By The Associated Press undefined

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

THREE THINGS TO KNOW TODAY

— House Republicans shot down a Democratic bid on Thursday to pass President Donald Trump's long-shot, end-of-session demand for \$2,000 direct payments to most Americans before signing a long-overdue COVID-19 relief bill. The vote shifts attention to whether Trump will follow through on his implied threat

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to veto the bill, which would likely cause a partial government shutdown and delay the \$600 direct payments that the bill does contain.

— California became the first state to record 2 million confirmed coronavirus cases, reaching the milestone on Christmas Eve as close to the entire state was under a strict stay-at-home order and hospitals were flooded with the largest crush of cases since the pandemic began.

— Schools nationwide have scrambled to get students outdoors during the pandemic to keep them safe and stop the spread of COVID-19. Some schools in the country's most frigid climates plan to keep outdoor learning going all winter, with students trading desks in warm classrooms for tree stumps or buckets.

THE NUMBERS: More than 3,000 people died in the U.S. from the coronavirus on Tuesday and Wednesday, according to the COVID Tracking Project, the third stretch of back-to-back days of 3,000-plus deaths this month. The seven-day rolling average for daily new deaths in the U.S. rose over the past two weeks from 2,259.9 on December 9 to 2,668.7 on December 23, according to data through from Johns Hopkins University.

DEATH TOLL: The U.S. death toll stands at 326,259 people, roughly the same as the population of Corpus Christi, Texas.

QUOTABLE: "Every day, I look into the eyes of someone who is struggling to breathe. — Jenny Carrillo, a charge nurse at Providence Holy Cross Medical Center in California, which recorded a record number of coronavirus patients this week.

ICYMI: 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.

ON THE HORIZON: As southwest Louisiana recovers from the back-to-back hurricanes, signs of progress compete with lingering evidence of mass destruction. Some worry that the hurricanes have not gotten the kind of attention that normally leads to an outpouring of support in a year dominated by the coronavirus pandemic, a deeply divisive election and a national reckoning on race,

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

Retailers brace for flood of returns from online shopping

By ANNE D'INNOCENZIO AP Retail Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — A huge surge in online shopping during the pandemic has been a savior for retailers, but it comes at a price.

Shoppers are expected to return twice as many items as they did during last year's holiday period, costing companies roughly \$1.1 billion, according to Narvar Inc., a software and technology company that manages online returns for hundreds of brands.

Retailers don't want the returns, but they do want shoppers who may not feel safe going to stores to be comfortable buying things they haven't seen or tried on in person.

People have been doing so much online buying since March that carriers like UPS and FedEx were already at full capacity before the holiday shopping season. And online sales just keep soaring. From Nov. 1 through Tuesday, they spiked 32% to \$171.6 billion, compared with the year-ago period, according to Adobe Analytics. The massive challenges of shipping COVID-19 vaccines in the weeks and months ahead could put further pressure on the system.

That means shoppers who return items may not get refunds until two weeks after they're sent back to the store, said Sara Skirboll, shopping expert at deals site RetailMeNot.

Many companies are offering more locations where customers can drop off returns, which cuts down shipping costs and gets refunds to shoppers more quickly.

Last year, Kohl's began allowing Amazon returns at all of its 1,000 stores — customers drop off items for free, with no box or label needed. This year, Amazon customers can also return items at 500 Whole

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Foods Market stores. That's in addition to Amazon's deal with UPS to allow similar drop-offs at UPS stores.

Happy Returns, a Santa Monica, California-based startup that works with about 150 online retailers like Rothy's and Revolve, has increased its number of drop-off locations to 2,600, from more than 700 last year. That includes 2,000 FedEx locations.

"It's a great time to be in the returns business. Every day, there's a record," said David Sobie, CEO and co-founder of Happy Returns, noting he's processed 50% more returns in December than November.

Walmart, the nation's largest retailer, announced earlier this week it will pick up items shipped and sold by Walmart.com from customers' homes for free through a new partnership with FedEx. The service will continue beyond the holiday shopping season.

A growing number of retailers are asking shoppers to not even bother sending back certain rejected items.

When Dick Pirozzolo wanted to return a too-small jersey he bought for \$40 on a website called Online Cycling Gear, he was pleasantly surprised with the response. The site told him to keep it, discard it, or give it to a friend or charity — and it will send him the right size for an extra \$10.

"I was fine with that," said the 77-year-old cycling enthusiast from Wellesley, Massachusetts. "I did a good thing for a friend, and I got a new shirt." The experience, he says, has given him confidence to buy more online this holiday season.

David Bassuk, global co-leader of AlixPartners' retail practice, says stores are increasingly making it easier for shoppers to feel less guilty about returning items.

"If they're not sure of their size, they order both sizes," he says. "If they're not sure which color, they order both colors. And if they're not sure which item, they order them all. But it's costly to the retailers, and the retailers are not well positioned to handle all the cost."

On average, people return 25% of items they buy online, compared with only 8% of what they buy in stores, according to Forrester Research's online analyst Sucharita Mulpuru. For clothing it's even higher, about 30%.

But not all rejected items are the same and have varying levels of depreciation, experts say. After an item is sent back to the retailer, the company must assess its condition and decide whether to resell it, send it to a liquidator or the landfill.

Optoro, a return logistics company, estimates the value of fashion apparel depreciates by 20% to 50% over an eight-to-16-week period. That's why it's so critical to get rejected items back and on sale again quickly.

Returns are also complicated this year because retailers pushed people to buy holiday gifts early to avoid shipping delays and crowded stores, meaning the return window may be closed by the time Christmas rolls around.

Amazon is allowing customers to return items until Jan. 31 for items shipped between Oct. 1 and Dec. 31, giving customers more time to decide. Last year, the policy didn't include items shipped in October.

Rachel Sakelaris, 25, of Newport Beach, California, bought her boyfriend a waterproof backpack on Black Friday, then realized there was a 30-day return policy. She decided to move up the gift exchange to last weekend so he had time to return if he didn't like it.

Buying too early can come with other hazards.

Sarah Huffman, 40, of Chesapeake, Virginia, wanted to get a jump start on the holiday season and spent \$600 on Amazon on gifts, including a \$60 pair of pajamas and a \$90 Xbox game for her five children, in May.

But then her husband, a disabled veteran, quit his job because he felt his boss was too lax with COVID-19 safety protocols. Now, her family is struggling to put food on the table, and she can't return some of the gifts she bought because the return window has lapsed.

"I was trying to take away the stress of the pandemic by buying early," she said. "I didn't realize that basic life choices would find a new low."

Follow Anne D'Innocenzio: <http://twitter.com/ADInnocenzio>

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People yearn to connect across borders amid pandemic holiday

The Associated Press undefined

To slow the spread of COVID-19, the United States, Canada and Mexico agreed in March to close their shared borders to nonessential travel.

Nine months later, it's Christmas. Families across the world are disconnected, but perhaps none more than those trapped on opposite sides of an international border. Some legally can't cross, and others can't afford to endure quarantines if they do.

Yet, the holiday spirit survives. Along both borders, AP photographers found families connecting in smaller, more intimate ways, overcoming unusual obstacles for shared celebrations.

At the U.S.-Mexico border, most years bring festive Las Posadas celebrations; the centuries-old tradition practiced in Mexico reenacts through song Mary and Joseph's search for refuge in Bethlehem.

Not this year. In addition to virus-related restrictions, people face another barrier: President Donald Trump's border wall that stretches hundreds of miles and is still under construction.

A little girl in Arizona recently stuck her arm through giant steel slats of the border wall, wrangling a baby doll as she looked to the sky. A little boy reached through the wall for a hug, looking tired and serious.

Contrast that with the scenes 2,500 miles (4,023 kilometers) away on the U.S.-Canada border.

A short strip of yellow police tape is the only thing dividing Derby Line, Vermont, and Stanstead, Quebec.

On a recent day, the mood outside the majestic, Victorian-style library where people from both countries come to congregate was festive and lighthearted.

A family unfolded chairs in the snow, bundled in winter coats on both sides of the border. They cheerfully exchanged Christmas cards across the police tape, chatting amiably as if there were no barrier.

A Canadian border policeman came by but only to make someone move their car.

The motivations for meeting this way vary: Dr. Tamsin Durand, a physician at a Vermont hospital, visited with her Canadian parents across the yellow tape, unwilling to enter Canada because it would trigger a two-week quarantine. So she, her husband and 3-year-old son, come to visit.

Travel 2,800 miles (4,506 kilometers) west, to Peace Arch Historical State Park in Blaine, Washington, where Canadians walked from a street parallel to the border across a rain-soaked ditch separating the two countries, many carrying tents, sleeping bags, food and other belongings for a visit with Americans.

To enter the U.S., they navigated a short but slippery downhill. Royal Canadian Mounted Police officers checked identification documents of Canadians as they returned. A sign that read "Leaving United States Border" reminded them of the international divide.

Couples romanced in the park; children played. Faith Dancey of White Rock, British Columbia, was all smiles with her bridal gown blowing in the wind as she walked across neatly groomed grass with her new husband. Drew MacPherson of Bellingham, Washington, gave her a joyful piggyback ride before her return to Canada. He stayed in the United States.

It's not so simple at the Mexico border. In Calexico, California, a planned cross-border celebration happened only in the U.S. because a construction site blocked access to participants in Mexicali, Mexico, a sprawling industrial city of 1 million people.

About a dozen mask-wearing people waited in Calexico to celebrate with Mexicans on Dec. 12, the day of Mexico's patron saint, Our Lady of Guadalupe. The Americans gathered on the other side, too far to see or speak to their loved ones, and rallied for open borders.

They left behind flowers and candles. They touched the wall before departing.

By Associated Press photographers Gregory Bull in Calexico, California, Ross Franklin in Douglas, Arizona, and Elaine Thompson in Blaine, Washington. Photographer Elise Amendola and writer Wilson Ring contributed from Derby Line, Vermont.

Relative of Blackwater victim in Iraq says pardons 'unfair'

By SAMYA KULLAB Associated Press

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BAGHDAD (AP) — Faris Fadel had just one word to describe the recent pardoning by the Trump administration of four private security contractors convicted of killing Iraqi civilians — including his brother — in a public square 13 years ago: Unfair.

Fadel's brother, Osama Abbas, had been on his way to work that fateful day. He had just crossed a street into Baghdad's Nisoor Square to do a money transfer — a last minute change in plans that would cost the 41-year old electrical engineer his life.

At the time, the Blackwater firm had been contracted to provide security for U.S. diplomats in Iraq. It was four years after the 2003 invasion of Iraq that ultimately toppled Saddam Hussein. The four men, military veterans working as contractors for the State Department, opened fire in the crowded traffic circle killing 14 Iraqis, including a child, and wounding over a dozen more.

The shooting of civilians by the contractors prompted an international outcry, left a reputational black eye on U.S. operations in Iraq and brought into question the government's use of private contractors in military zones.

Nicholas Slatten was convicted of murder, while Paul Slough, Evan Liberty and Dustin Heard were convicted of manslaughter in 2014 after a months-long trial in federal court in Washington. Each had pleaded innocent.

On Tuesday, President Donald Trump pardoned them.

"This decision was wrong, it was unfair," said Fadel, now 44 years old. "How can you release those who have blood on their hands?"

Abbas left a wife and four children behind. The eldest was in her second year of university and the youngest in the last of primary school at the time of his death. He was happy with his life, Fadel recalled.

"He didn't have much, but he didn't want for anything," he said.

On that day in September 2007, Abbas was on his way to work but decided to cross the road to a money transfer service. Fadel recalled it was a time when the country was still reeling in the aftermath of bloody sectarian street wars. "We were starting to feel like we could come up for air," he said.

Then, the bullets rained down on Nisoor Square.

Defense lawyers for the four contractors argued they were returning fire after being ambushed by Iraqi insurgents. Prosecutors said the convoy had launched an unprovoked attack using sniper fire, machine guns and grenade launchers. Iraqis considered it a massacre.

Years after the attack, Fadel is still bitter. "They were all civilians, they weren't guilty of anything," he said.

Fadel lost not only a brother, but a father figure. Ten years his senior, Abbas had looked after the family following the untimely death of their father at a young age.

"He raised me," he said of Abbas.

Abbas had started his own engineering company and took responsibility for the entire family. His death had sent them down a spiral of shock and insolvency. His widow didn't speak for days and his mother took to a wheelchair after suffering cardiac arrest from the shock. Abbas' youngest son suffers from severe depression.

"They destroyed our home and our family," he said of the contractors.

Five years after Abbas' death, Fadel took over the role of family breadwinner. "But I couldn't do 5% of what my brother did," he said. "I couldn't replace their father."

Fadel also blames the Iraqi government for not pushing for justice sooner. Iraq's Foreign Ministry, hours after the pardon was announced, said it would follow up with the United States over diplomatic channels, saying the move "regrettably ignored the dignity of the victims and the feelings and rights of their relatives."

Asked what would bring him peace of mind over a decade since his brother's killing, Fadel said only a death sentence for the contractors could bring solace.

"An eye for an eye," he said.

"They are guilty, you don't need a court to prove it."

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Lamentation for sports in 2020: A year of living virally

By FRED LIEF AP Sports Writer

Well, had enough yet?

Don't look at the score.

How bad did it get?

Like nothing before.

B.C. (Before Coronavirus)

The Setup

An omen, maybe. Hard to say.

The drumbeat starts on New Year's Day.

The calendar flips, one quick turn

And then we're mourning David Stern.

Wild-card Patriots thrown off course.

New England, Brady mull divorce.

A perfect Cajun title run --

Joe Burrow 's cooking; Clemson's done.

Astros punished, sign-stealing scheme.

Hinch and GM are dumped by team.

No need to wait. Oh, yes, there's more --

Cora, Beltran are out the door.

Conor McGregor's in the cage,

Fighting again, all fists and rage.

Jeter 's up ... for the Hall of Fame.

Just one voter omits his name.

Then in the California hills

The fog rolls in, the heart soon chills.

A chopper's down: shock, disbelief --

Kobe, daughter and waves of grief.

LeBron, on court, gives heartfelt shout,

A declaration: "Mamba out."

Sports still reeling by Super Bowl,

Where Patrick Mahomes takes control.

Chiefs rally with alarming speed --

At last a crown for Andy Reid.

Down Under, Novak has his way,

Bulks up his Grand Slam resume.

Pete Rose makes yet another plea:

The Astros were much worse than me.

Auto race scrapped, Chinese Grand Prix.

Whirlwind's coming we don't yet see.

Tyson Fury reclaims the throne,

Pummeling Wilder to the bone.

Daytona ends in flames and fear

And Hamlin winning like last year.

Staples Center fills to the hilt

For Kobe at the house he built.

A.C. (After Coronavirus)

The Shutdown

Rudy Gobert is feeling well

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But lost his sense of taste and smell.
High-fives banished by NBA,
Fans in Europe are kept away.
Olympic angst: Delay? Abort?
Indecision, a medal sport.
We then look up and turn around --
The house is burning to the ground.
The NBA shuts down its game.
In college sports it's much the same.
March Madness hangs on hope and prayer
But it's soon gone, beyond repair:
The games not played, the crowds not heard,
The shots not made, the dreams deferred.
No bracket busters, office pools.
Coronavirus sets the rules.
The NHL, with ample cause,
Decides to put the league on "pause."
Spring training stops. It's getting rough.
The Ides of March throws nasty stuff.
Masters forced to run for cover --
A revision like no other.
Kentucky Derby scratched for May;
French Open topples on same day.
Indy 500, down the hatch.
Same with Wimbledon – game, set, match.
Tokyo's off, the Olympics done.
The torch is passed to '21.
Sports keep falling like dominoes,
And no one cares about the 'Stros.
Amid the chaos, doubts and fears
Tom Brady joins the Buccaneers
The Substitutions
Fans are desperate, start to show it --
End of the world as we know it.
They don't feel fine. They want some juice.
Hey, there's soccer in Belarus.
Need some action to get it on?
Then bet on baseball in Taiwan.
Try some arm wrestling on TV.
Ax throwing, maybe? Spelling bee?
Filling the void till hoops restarts
Is Jordan's "Last Dance" (in 10 parts).
Virtual sports help get us back
And NASCAR has the inside track.
Make-believe spin, make-believe crash.
What's real? Kyle Larson 's racist trash.
Live and remote! NFL draft.
The league shows off its high-tech craft
Managing this odd displacement --

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Roger Goodell in his basement.
Big cable draw, golf's got the goods:
Peyton, Brady, Mickelson, Woods.
Baseball? Just negotiations,
Insults, tweets and accusations.
Comeback plans for Fourth of July
Go stale like month-old apple pie.

The Struggle

Part I

Death on a Minnesota street
Turns up the volume, spikes the heat.
A time to march, a time to seethe:
Black Lives Matter and "I can't breathe."
"We want justice," says Eric Reid,
Brought with all deliberate speed.
"Enough," says Jordan, on new ground,
"Pained ... plain angry" and now unbound.
Lisa Leslie's online decree:
If not "outraged," don't follow me.
Osaka is, no need to ask.
Come the Open, it's on her mask.
NASCAR moves to another lane,
Bans Dixie's flag -- a blight, a stain.
Bubba Wallace, all strength and pride,
Has drivers walking by his side.
A reckoning, and none too soon --
Even Goodell changes his tune.
We need, he says, to listen, feel.
The players now are free to kneel.
Missing from this good intention?
Kaepernick's name, not a mention.
What's in a name? Here's something new:
"Redskins" under "thorough review."
Has Snyder found his moral core?
His sponsors simply said, No more.
New name? You gotta laugh or scream:
For now, "Washington Football Team."
By year's end, wanting to do right,
Cleveland Indians see the light.

The Startup

Part I

A kick, a smack, a well-placed knee --
Sports returns with the UFC.
Golf in Texas: Field is rested,
Fans are barred, swabbed players tested.
The Belmont's empty, out of place
And Tiz the Law rules shortened race.
NBA joins Disney's bubble,
Makes a wish to wall off trouble.
NHL restores some order,

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Puts two hubs north of the border.
Baseball's back and the sport retools:
Sixty-game season, beer league rules.
Cardboard fans (all gimmick and lark)
Don't buy hot dogs, don't pay to park.
Soon all goes wrong -- COVID's winning,
Marlins pounded in first inning.
Cardinals, poof! Wide infection --
Vanished, gone, witness protection.
Jumbled schedule, ghastly mess.
Who plays where is anyone's guess.
PGA? Morikawa 's here.
Brooks Koepka can't win every year.
Sports giveth; sports taketh away.
College football's the price to pay,
The risks too daunting to confront --
Big Ten, Pac-12 decide to punt.
Weeks later, pressured, in a bind,
Both leagues reverse: Uh, never mind.
At Indy, Sato wins once more.
The silence drowns the engines' roar.

The Struggle

Part II

Now Kenosha commands the stage --
Days of anguish and nights of rage.
The Bucks refuse to take the court --
A ripple then waves of support.
The NBA, of course, goes first.
Others follow as bubbles burst.
Floyd and Arbery; Taylor, Blake.
How much longer? What does it take?
Doc Rivers asks, on being Black:
Why won't my country love me back?

The Startup

Part II

Sports pauses with a mournful heart:
Brock, Thompson, Seaver ... days apart.
Baffert's Derby, Authentic scores,
With protests outside Churchill's doors.
Blue Jays sing, "Oh, give me a home,"
Landing where the Buffalo roam.
So much sports now, to say the least:
April famine, September feast.
NFL season starts anew.
Players link arms, fans promptly boo.
Open tennis: Thiem 's startling show;
Golf's Open, likewise, DeChambeau.
Tour de France, Slovenia's day.
Stanley Cup bubble, Tampa Bay.
Defying odds, even reason,

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Baseball makes it through its season,
Leaving summer and into fall --
Bob Gibson 's time, October ball.
Patriots-Chiefs, virus attack --
Cam Newton can't avoid this sack.
Whole teams are benched, blow after blow.
Tennessee Titans? Where'd they go?
A Preakness filly makes some noise --
Swiss Skydiver outruns the boys.
WNBA stands tall.
Seattle Storm can play some ball.
Iga Swiatek? What'd you say?
Just like Nadal she wins on clay.
LeBron, Lakers, own Disney's gym,
Sense Kobe's there, above the rim.
The Dodgers, Kershaw expiate
The ghosts of 1988
As baseball puts its year to rest
With Justin Turner 's COVID test.
The White Sox bring La Russa back
(Their deal fell through for Connie Mack).
Chase Elliott takes NASCAR's jewel,
Family bloodlines filled with fuel.
The Marlins smash that old boys' gang.
Glass ceilings shatter with Kim Ng.
Dustin Johnson outplays them all --
Green jacket just the style for fall.
Both lightning and the lightning rod,
Maradona, the Hand of God.
College basketball's set to play --
Mangled schedules, disarray.
Steelers rolling but, yes, there's flaw.
Niners banished by county law.
Across the week more games are strewn,
Even on Wednesday afternoon.
Through it all, a truth emerges:
Games go on while COVID surges
And records fall, that much is clear --
Consider Tara VanDerveer.
Now set, the college playoff queue:
Tide-Irish, Clemson-OSU.
Then look who's back? The NBA.
Seems you were here the other day.
But who can tell? It's all a blur:
The games they played, the way we were.
The Summation
Let's see this out, get to the end,
And who knows what's around the bend?
But we'll toast, of course, don't think twice --
Take a deep breath and roll the dice.

Epicurious is righting cultural wrongs one recipe at a time

By LEANNE ITALIE Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — With a new Black editor in chief and ambitious promises to do better, a little corner of the Conde Nast universe is taking on racial and cultural injustice one recipe at a time.

Since July, the small staff at Epicurious, a resource site for home cooks, has been scouring 55 years' worth of recipes from a variety of Conde Nast magazines in search of objectionable titles, ingredient lists and stories told through a white American lens.

"It came after Black Lives Matter, after a lot of consciousness-raising among the editors and staff," said David Tamarkin, the white digital director for Epicurious. "It came out of conversations that we had about how we can do better, where are we failing and where have our predecessors failed?"

Called the Archive Repair Project, the work is also an outgrowth of complaints and controversies at Conde Nast. But it's just one effort on a full plate of initiatives, said Sonia Chopra, who's been executive editor of Bon Appetit and Epicurious for about four months, working under the new editor in chief, Dawn Davis.

In all, the 25-year-old site (with a staff of 10) is a repository of a massive 35,000 recipes from Bon Appetit, Gourmet, Self, House & Garden and Epicurious itself. They stretch back to 1965.

"The language that we use to talk about food has evolved so much from, sure, the 1960s but also the 1990s, and I think it is our duty as journalists, as people who work in food media, to make sure that we are reflecting that appropriately," Chopra said.

Epicurious and Bon Appetit have been at the center of accusations that also plague others in the food world: undervaluing staffers of color, perpetuating structural racism, racial and gender discrimination, and more. Some of those issues led several Bon Appetit employees to leave earlier this year after Editor-in-Chief Adam Rapoport resigned over a 2004 Halloween "brownface" photo and amid allegations of racial discrimination.

While Conde Nast studies pay equity, and has issued apologies and pledges to do such things as expand unconscious-bias education and create inclusion and diversity plans, the Archive Repair Project rolls on.

The bulk of Epicurious site traffic goes to the archive, mostly recipes but also articles and other editorial work, Tamarkin and Chopra said.

"Being such an old site, we're full of a lot of ideas about American cooking that really go through a white lens," Tamarkin said. "We know that American cooking is Mexican American cooking and Indian American cooking and Nigerian American cooking, that that's the kind of cooking that's really happening in this country every day."

One of the first issues "repaired," he said, was use of the word "exotic."

"I can't think of any situation where that word would be appropriate, and yet it's all over the site," Tamarkin said. "That's painful for me and I'm sure others."

Another word requiring removal was a lime reference that included a racial slur directed at Black Africans, particularly in South Africa.

Other terms, such as "authentic" and "ethnic," are also among repairs.

The work, Chopra said, is "certainly something that I think not just Conde Nast brands but all over food media and media in general are really thinking about."

Since July, when Tamarkin outlined the project on Epicurious, he and his staff have fixed about 200 recipes and other work. Some repairs are more complicated than removing a single word, such as an entire story about the "ethnic" aisle at the grocery store.

"We have published recipes with headnotes that fail to properly credit the inspirations for the dish, or degrade the cuisine the dish belongs to. We have purported to make a recipe 'better' by making it faster, or swapping in ingredients that were assumed to be more familiar to American palates, or easier to find. We have inferred (and in some cases outright labeled) ingredients and techniques to be 'surprising' or 'weird.' And we have published terminology that was widely accepted in food writing at the time, and that we now recognize has always been racist," Tamarkin wrote.

He noted: "Certainly there will be times when our edits do not go far enough; some of our repairs will

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need repairs.”

For Bon Appetit, that’s exactly what happened when an outcry among readers led it to make multiple changes including the headnote and references to Haiti on a pumpkin soup recipe put forth by Chef Marcus Samuelsson, a guest editor. The magazine referred to it as soup *joumou*, a beloved Haitian staple that symbolizes the country’s bloody liberation from its French colonizers.

It was not soup *joumou*, but was intended by Samuelsson as an homage. The magazine adapted an entry from one of his cookbooks, “The Rise: Black Cooks and the Soul of American Food.” Both Bon Appetit and Samuelsson, who is Black, apologized after calls of erasure and cultural appropriation.

Much of food media is facing race and ethnicity fallout that can be traced to white dominance in the highest echelons of the field. On the Epicurious repair project, for instance, just 31% of the people identifying and fixing the archive are staff of color.

Chopra said broader plans are in motion.

“We’re committed to building teams that are inclusive and thoughtful, and that means always assessing and reassessing our policies and processes. As we transition into 2021 with new leadership, we are examining these across the board, from hiring best practices to making sure we are communicating and working collaboratively and holistically across teams and platforms,” Chopra added.

In the meantime, Tamarkin and his crew are slowly pressing on with their archive repairs at Epicurious, where “Asian” is no longer the name of a cold rice noodle salad, and a *vadouvan* spice blend has lost its mention as “exotic.”

“A lot of these problems happened because there was a lack of thoughtfulness,” Tamarkin said, “so the solutions require that we be thoughtful now.”

Notes from France honor American soldiers’ D-Day sacrifice

By SARAH BLAKE MORGAN Associated Press

FORT BRAGG, N.C. (AP) —

Lt. Col. Michael Burns didn’t know exactly what was inside the small brown box that arrived on his Fayetteville, North Carolina, doorstep but the return address in the left corner let him know he couldn’t open it right away.

The package had made the long journey from Sainte-Mere-Eglise, the first French village to be liberated from Nazi occupation by the U.S. Army’s storied 82nd Airborne Division on June 6, 1944. Every year since, division paratroopers travel to Normandy to commemorate the anniversary of D-Day, a trip that was canceled this year amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Weeks later, Burns, a public affairs officer, sat the unopened box down inside the 82nd Airborne Division Museum on Fort Bragg, surrounded by glass cases filled with perfectly preserved green service uniforms, shining jump boots and other World War II relics.

He’d assembled a group of paratroopers and a historian to take part in the unboxing as his team set up cameras and lights to capture the reveal.

History looms large over the men and women of the 82nd. This is the type of story they live for.

Capt. Darren Cinatl began pulling open the tightly wrapped package. The history buff jumped into Normandy for the commemoration three times. Each time he tries to imagine what it was like for the young men unknowingly on the verge of history.

“To stand in the door of a C-47 and think about what that jumpmaster saw on the night of June 5 as they departed England, into June 6,” Cinatl said. “You can’t put yourself quite in their shoes, but you can only imagine what motivated them to fight the way they did.”

Beneath the brown paper lay a keepsake box decorated with American decals — 500 handwritten postcards from the residents of Sainte-Mere-Eglise inside.

After the celebrations were canceled in June, town Mayor Alain Holley organized an effort alongside U.S. Army Europe to express their gratitude for the longstanding relationship they share with the division. Earlier in the year, the division had sent red and blue All American Division patches to the town’s children.

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Holley grew up hearing D-Day stories from his grandparents.

"Nobody should forget the sacrifices that the American soldiers made for France," he told The Associated Press.

While Holley watched by video call, the group took turns reading the cards out loud.

"I'm so glad to write a few words from the ground you know so well," someone wrote. "Thanks to you I'm free to do so."

Most were in English, but two soldiers sat by ready to translate the French cards.

A 9-year-old child named Gabriel told U.S. soldiers his birthday is June 6. He wanted to thank them for the sacrifice they made to make him free.

During his visits to Normandy, Cinatl is always struck by the local's grasp of U.S. history, specifically how well they know the ins and outs of the 82nd. Children in France know much more about American military history, he admits, than kids in the United States do.

"To them, it's their family story," he said.

Twelve thousand men from the 82nd joined Allied forces on June 5 and 6, 1944, to liberate German-occupied France. Thousands parachuted blindly out of low-flying planes into unknown territory alongside the 101st Airborne Division.

The 82nd lost 1,100 soldiers during the campaign and the ones who survived are passing at a staggering rate, especially in a pandemic that is more deadly for older people.

Cinatl said keeping their stories alive is integral to the division's future success.

"It is vitally important that this current generation carries on that history," he said.

One final postcard came from Christophe, a waiter at a restaurant in Sainte-Mere-Eglise's church square. He told the American soldiers to look for the tall guy in the Yankees cap when they return to Normandy next June.

"Show me this postcard and there will be a free beer in it for you," he wrote.

Raise your mittens: Outdoor learning continues into winter

By DAVID SHARP Associated Press

PORTLAND, Maine (AP) — Cindy Soule's fourth graders in Maine's largest city have studied pollination in a community garden. They solved an erosion problem that was damaging trees. They learned about bear scat.

Then came a fresh layer of snow and temperatures that hovered around freezing — but her students were unfazed.

Bundled up and masked, they scooted outside with their belongings in buckets. They collected their pencils and clipboards, plopped the buckets upside down in the snow, took a seat and went to work.

The lesson? Snow, of course, and how snowflakes are formed.

Schools nationwide scrambled to get students outdoors during the pandemic to keep them safe and stop the spread of COVID-19. Now, with temperatures plummeting, a smaller number of schools — even in some of the nation's most frigid climes — plan to keep it going all winter long, with students trading desks in warm classrooms for tree stumps or buckets.

"It's the healthiest, safest place for us to be right now. Anything that we can do to get kids outdoors for longer periods of time is vital. This is where we need to be right now," said Anne Stires, an outdoor learning consultant and advocate in Maine.

In New Hampshire, fourth and fifth graders are still outside at James Faulkner Elementary School in Stoddard after building an outdoor classroom by clearing a patch of woods and adding a fire pit, rock seating and hammocks.

"They're begging me to go out," said teacher Amanda Bridges.

In Colorado, kindergarteners through sixth graders in the Lake County school district are in classrooms for half the week. For the other half, they study and then engage outdoors.

A preschool at the University of Minnesota is testing an all-outdoor model where kids are allowed inside

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only to use the bathroom or to wash their hands when it's cold, said Sheila Williams Ridge, director of the university's Shirley G. Moore Lab School.

The school system in Portland identified 156 outdoor learning sites at 17 buildings, some of which are still in use this winter, said Brooke Teller, outdoor learning coordinator.

Donations poured in. A carpentry union made 210 easels for teachers. The city provided tree stumps, and businesses provided buckets for seats. Schools used federal aid for coats, hats, gloves and snow pants.

The school district sent a letter printed in 11 languages to parents to explain the idea. Parents reacted warmly, Soule said.

For educators, outdoor learning is yet another transition. Last spring, it was remote learning. Then they switched to hybrid models. Now they're scrambling to equip kids to stay warm outside.

On a recent day, Soule's lesson drew from the work of the late Wilson Bentley, a Vermont man known as Snowflake Bentley, who took the first photographs detailing snowflakes' complex shapes. He is credited with the observation that no two snowflakes are identical.

Soule's young scientists at the Gerald E. Talbot Community School answered questions about snowflakes and offered their recollections about the water cycle. Then they examined snowflakes with magnifying glasses.

Afterward, Mohamednur Ali reflected on the differences of hands-on learning outdoors versus sitting at his desk.

"It's a good thing because you can see the real thing," the 9-year-old said. "We learn what is around us."

Portland is home to a growing immigrant population. Soule's students during this class come from Somalia, Iraq and Angola.

"We have students with varying language needs," Soule said. "The beauty of coming outdoors is that it's an access point for all learners."

Many schools use guidelines from the Iowa Department of Public Health that say youngsters can be outside when it's around freezing but should head indoors when it drops to the lower teens.

Stires founded the Juniper Hill School in Alna, an hour from Portland, to test ways of teaching through nature, and she has demonstrated how dressing for the elements and active exploration keep kids happy on cold days.

Taken to the limit, she has found, kids can spend virtually all day outside.

Her pre-K and kindergarten kids even nap outside. They're cozy during their quiet time in hammocks in wool-lined sleeping bags filled with hot water bottles.

Outdoor learning may work for rural and suburban schools, but it's more difficult to pull off in urban schools, and winter weather is a significant barrier, said Daniel Domenech, executive director of the American Association of School Administrators.

This is Portland's first widespread use of outdoor learning, and the goal is to keep it going even after the pandemic.

Teachers are encouraged, but not required, to take their classes outdoors, and a school survey shows about half of teachers doing so.

Soule said her students will never forget the pandemic's hardships. But she hopes studying in nature will be among their good memories of 2020.

"They're seeing the outdoors around them and it brings relevancy to what they're studying," Soule said. "They will remember that forever."

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 hampered 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.

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Christy 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 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

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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.

This story has been updated to correct the first name from Brandy to Christy in the second paragraph.

Follow Santana on Twitter @ruskygal.

'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.

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

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, Dec. 25, the 360th day of 2020. There are six days left in the year. This is Christmas Day.

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Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 25, 1990, the World Wide Web, the system providing quick access to websites over the Internet, was born in Geneva, Switzerland, as computer scientists Tim Berners-Lee and Robert Cailliau (KAH'-yoh) created the world's first hyperlinked webpage.

On this date:

In A.D. 336, the first known commemoration of Christmas on Dec. 25 took place in Rome.

In 1066, William the Conqueror was crowned King of England.

In 1776, Gen. George Washington and his troops crossed the Delaware River for a surprise attack against Hessian forces at Trenton, New Jersey, during the American Revolutionary War.

In 1818, "Silent Night (Stille Nacht)" was publicly performed for the first time during the Christmas Mid-night Mass at the Church of St. Nikolaus in Oberndorf, Austria.

In 1926, Hirohito became emperor of Japan, succeeding his father, Emperor Yoshihito.

In 1946, comedian W.C. Fields died in Pasadena, California, at age 66.

In 1977, comedian Sir Charles Chaplin died in Switzerland at age 88.

In 1989, ousted Romanian President Nicolae Ceausescu (chow-SHES'-koo) and his wife, Elena, were executed following a popular uprising. Former baseball manager Billy Martin, 61, died in a traffic accident near Binghamton, New York.

In 1991, Soviet President Mikhail S. Gorbachev went on television to announce his resignation as the eighth and final leader of a communist superpower that had already gone out of existence.

In 1999, space shuttle Discovery's astronauts finished their repair job on the Hubble Space Telescope and released it back into orbit.

In 2003, sixteen people were killed by mudslides that swept over campgrounds in California's San Bernardino Valley. Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf (pur-VEHZ' moo-SHAH'-ruhv) survived a second assassination bid in 11 days, but 17 other people were killed.

In 2009, passengers aboard Northwest Airlines Flight 253 foiled an attempt to blow up the plane as it was landing in Detroit by seizing Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab (OO'-mahr fah-ROOK' ahb-DOOL'-moo-TAH'-lahb), who tried to set off explosives in his underwear. (Abdulmutallab later pleaded guilty and was sentenced to life in prison.)

Ten years ago: The top U.S. and NATO commander in Afghanistan, Gen. David Petraeus, crisscrossed the country, making a Christmas visit to coalition troops at some of the main battle fronts in a show of appreciation and support in the tenth year of the war against the Taliban. A female suicide bomber attacked an aid center in Pakistan, killing at least 45 people. The West Bank town of Bethlehem bustled with its biggest crowd of Christian pilgrims in years. Former Venezuelan President Carlos Andres Perez died in Miami. Olympics documentary filmmaker Bud Greenspan, 84, died in New York.

Five years ago: President Barack Obama paid tribute to six U.S. service members killed in a suicide attack in Afghanistan on Dec. 21 as he delivered a Christmas Day gesture of gratitude to U.S. troops at Marine Corps Base Hawaii in Kaneohe Bay. Pope Francis, in his Christmas Day greeting from the loggia of St. Peter's Basilica, encouraged U.N.-backed peace deals for Syria and Libya and praised those who welcomed migrants. Tennis star Serena Williams was named The Associated Press Female Athlete of the Year for the fourth time. Science-fiction writer George Clayton Johnson, 86, died in Los Angeles.

One year ago: The annual reenactment of George Washington's crossing of the Delaware River in 1776 was completed for the first time in three years, after being scrapped twice in a row because of bad weather.

Today's Birthdays: Author Anne Roiphe is 85. Actor Hanna Schygulla (SHEE'-goo-lah) is 77. Rhythm-and-blues singer John Edwards (The Spinners) is 76. Actor Gary Sandy is 75. Singer Jimmy Buffett is 74. Pro and College Football Hall-of-Famer Larry Csonka is 74. Country singer Barbara Mandrell is 72. Actor Sissy Spacek is 71. Blues singer/guitarist Joe Louis Walker is 71. Former White House adviser Karl Rove is 70. Actor CCH Pounder is 68. Singer Annie Lennox is 66. Reggae singer-musician Robin Campbell (UB40) is 66. Country singer Steve Wariner is 66. Singer Shane MacGowan (The Pogues, The Popes) is 63. Baseball Hall of Famer Rickey Henderson is 62. The former chair of the Council of Economic Advisers, Christina

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Romer, is 62. Actor Klea Scott is 52. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is 49. Rock musician Noel Hogan (The Cranberries) is 49. Singer Dido is 49. Rock singer Mac Powell (Third Day) is 48. Rhythm-and-blues singer Ryan Shaw is 40. Country singer Alecia Elliott is 38. Pop singers Jess and Lisa Origliasso (The Veronicas) are 36. Actor Perdita Weeks is 35. Rock singer-musician Lukas Nelson (Lukas Nelson & Promise of the Real) is 32.