

# Groton Daily Independent

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## Groton Angel Tree Thanks You!

I would like to thank everyone that helped make the Angel tree in Groton a big success again this year. Thanks again!

### **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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#306 in a series

## Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

[New data came in shortly before midnight; I have edited below to reflect these updated numbers; but I have not edited the commentary, only the direct interpretation of these numbers. Please read on with that understanding. The reporting period is now, instead of several hours short, of 24 hours, a few hours long; neither is ideal, but it is what it is.]

We haven't had a data update since early afternoon, and I'm not so sure we will any more tonight. I'll keep checking until midnight and edit if I see another one, but I suspect the data folks are taking some time off today too. Can't begrudge them that.

That said, we're operating on a seriously shortened reporting period on a day we expected reporting to be light anyhow; and the numbers show it. The new cases and deaths are extremely low, but I don't want you breaking out the champagne; I am quite certain they're not real. They are, however, what we have, so here goes:

There were 109,600 new cases reported today, about half what we've been running. That brings total cases to 18,797,900, just 0.6% over yesterday's total. I will note that California is now over two million cases, not a great milestone. Hospitalizations are what they are; a shortened reporting period doesn't seem to have affected them much at all as we set a record for a fourth consecutive day with 120,151. There were only 1281 deaths reported today, maybe half of what we've been having. We've lost 330,336 Americans to this virus, just 0.4% more than yesterday.

As I mentioned last night, we expected depressed reporting; many states did not report at all today. Couple that with the early data cut-off, and these totals are relatively meaningless. I will continue to report for the sake of completeness, but we will wait out the year to get more solid information again.

Anthony Gaskin has been on the front lines throughout this pandemic, delivering packages for UPS. He delivers almost 200 packages a day through all kinds of weather, always with a smile and a wave; and his recipients have noticed. One of those residents told ABC News, "He kept being an uplifting, positive, warm, and caring part of our lives, even without walking in our doors. Anthony was a constant. He made things feel more normal." That's a valuable skill during this pandemic, especially at Christmas when there is so much to do to deliver all of the packages.

And so this resident arranged for a thank-you for Gaskin; she said, "Maybe I could get a few people to get together and we could surprise him [as he] drives by," adding, "It really stands out when you recognize the risk he puts himself through." So more than 100 people showed up on the street on the appointed day holding signs expressing their appreciation and well wishes for the driver.

Gaskin told ABC News, "I wasn't quite sure what was going on at first. It felt like my heart was going to jump out of my body. . . . So it was a total surprise." He also had a message for all of us in this difficult season: "I like to remind everybody that a lot of people out here are a lot less fortunate than we are. Reach out and try to help somebody during this holiday season." It's always a good time to show how much you care, and the best time is especially now.

Someone sent me a thought about Christmas today, one that might ring especially true for you in this very strange time. These are the words of a not very famous woman, Agnes Pharo: "What is Christmas? It is tenderness for the past, courage for the present, hope for the future. It is a fervent wish that every cup may overflow with blessings rich and eternal, and that every path may lead to peace."

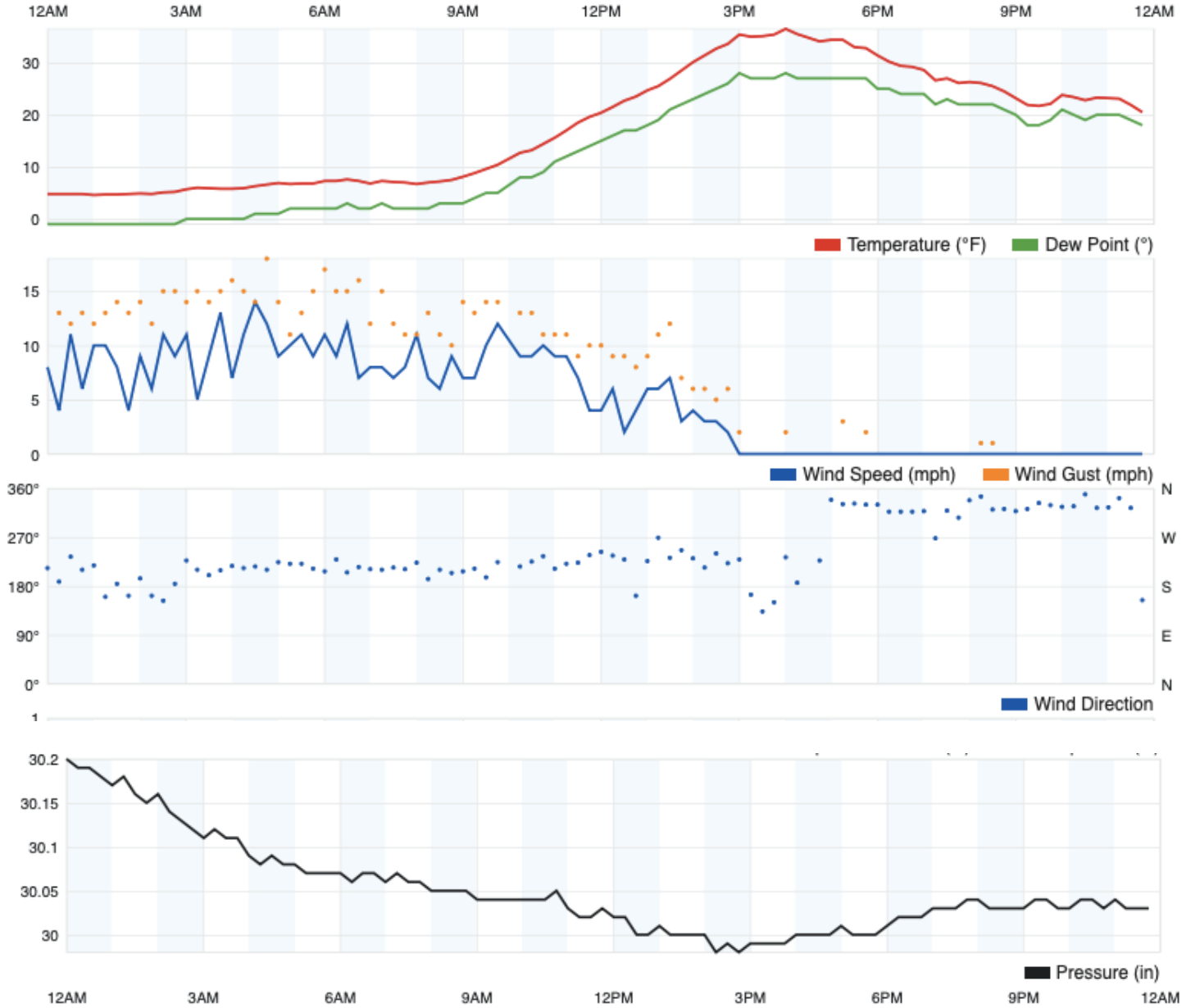
Most of us will come out on the other side of this pandemic alive and more or less healthy, so we need to start planning how we will live on the other side. And if you or I are among the unfortunate ones who will not be around in the after, we need to start planning what we will leave behind. I'm sort of thinking both scenarios will bring most of us to the same place. It's time to start living with intention.

Be well. I'll be back.

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



Areas Freezing Fog then Mostly Cloudy

High: 25 °F

Tonight



Chance Snow

Low: 19 °F

Sunday



Chance Snow then Mostly Cloudy

High: 19 °F

Sunday Night



Partly Cloudy

Low: 4 °F

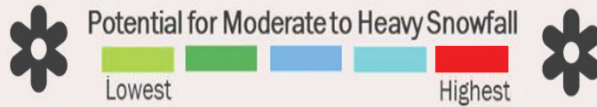
Monday



Sunny

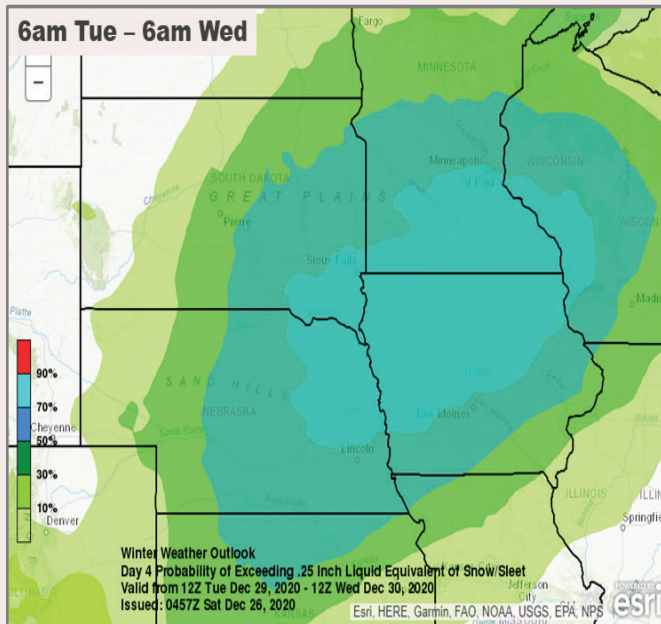
High: 19 °F

## Tuesday/Tuesday Night Snowfall Potential



Updated: 12/26/2020 3:13 AM Central

NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE  
OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION



### What We Know

Confidence is increasing that a winter storm system will bring snowfall to the Northern Plains Tuesday through Wednesday morning. **Adverse travel conditions are possible.**

### What We Don't Know

The exact track of this system and thus the location of heaviest snowfall. Exact timing is also uncertain. **Staytuned!**

### What You Can Do

Continue to monitor the latest forecast from a reliable source, especially if you have travel plans. And as always, have a winter survival kit prepared.

Models continue to bring a storm system into the central and northern plains on Tuesday, with snowfall spreading across the region. What remains unclear is the exact track of the system and resultant snowfall amounts, as well as areas impacted the most. As of right now, the target area for heaviest snow still appears to be just south of the Aberdeen forecast area. That said, confidence is increasing that we'll see at least measurable snow with light to perhaps moderate accumulations by the time we get to Tuesday into Wednesday morning.



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## Today in Weather History

December 26, 1988: Moderate to heavy snow fell across western and northern South Dakota, as well as across most of Minnesota, from the evening of the 25th through the morning of the 27th. Much of the northern one-half to two-thirds of Minnesota and the western and northern sections of South Dakota were blanketed with 6-12 inches of new snow. Numerous accidents and minor injuries were indirectly related to the snowy conditions. Several snowfall amounts in South Dakota included 12 inches at Timber Lake; 10 to 12 inches at Seneca and Hoven; 11 inches at Aberdeen; 8 inches at Pierre, Eureka and Blunt; 7 inches at Chelsea, Redfield, Cottonwood, and Rapid City; and 6 inches at Ferney, Huron, and Eden. In Minnesota, 8 inches fell in Browns Valley, 6 inches fell at Wheaton, and 5 inches accumulated at Artichoke Lake.

December 26, 1776: George Washington crossed the ice-clogged Delaware River. He marched on Trenton in the midst of snow and sleet thus surprising and captured many of the British garrisons.

December 26, 2004: A magnitude 9.1 earthquake near Sumatra, Indonesia generated a tsunami that caused tremendous devastation throughout the Indian Ocean. The quake, which is the third largest in the world since 1900, caused severe damage and casualties in northern Sumatra, Indonesia, and in the Nicobar Islands, India. The tsunami that followed killed more people than any other tsunami in recorded history, with 227,898 dead or missing. The total estimated material losses in the Indian Ocean region were \$10 billion, and insured losses were \$2 billion.

1776 - George Washington crossed the ice clogged Delaware River. He marched on Trenton in the midst of snow and sleet thus surprising and capturing many of the British garrison. (David Ludlum)

1947 - New York City received a record 26.4 inches of snow in 24 hours, with as much as 32 inches reported in the suburbs. The heavy snow brought traffic to a standstill, and snow removal cost eight million dollars. Thirty thousand persons were called upon to remove the 100 million tons of snow. The storm claimed 27 lives. (26th-27th) (David Ludlum)

1983 - Miami, FL, established a December record with a morning low of 33 degrees. Just three days earlier, and again three days later, record warm temperatures were reported in Florida, with daytime highs in the 80s. (The National Weather Summary)

1987 - Freezing rain plagued parts of the south central U.S., from northwest Texas to southwestern Missouri. Southwestern Missouri was turned into a huge skating rink as roads became sheets of ice. Damage to tree limbs and power lines compared to a hundred tornadoes, and half of the city of Springfield was left without electricity for 24 hours. Snow, sleet and ice covered the northwest two thirds of Oklahoma. 75,000 homes were left without electricity as ice accumulated one to two inches in a 40-mile band from Duncan to Norman to Tulsa to Miami. 25,000 of those homes were still without power a week later. The storm claimed the lives of seven persons. (24th-27th) (The Weather Channel) (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Low pressure produced heavy snow from North Dakota to western sections of the Great Lakes Region, with up to fourteen inches reported in the Chicago area. Cold arctic air hovered over the Plateau Region. Temperatures in the Big Smokey Valley of Nevada plunged to 31 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Strong northerly winds behind an arctic cold front produced snow squalls in the Great Lakes Region and dangerous wind chill temperatures in the northeastern U.S. Wind chill readings as cold as 40 degrees below zero were reported in New York State. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2003 - A major snow storm in Utah caused several fatalities due to avalanches. As much as 2 ft of snow fell in parts of the state, particularly south of Salt Lake City. Three people that were seen snowboarding in the Aspen Grove recreational area have been presumed dead, all others managed to escape or be rescued (Reuters).

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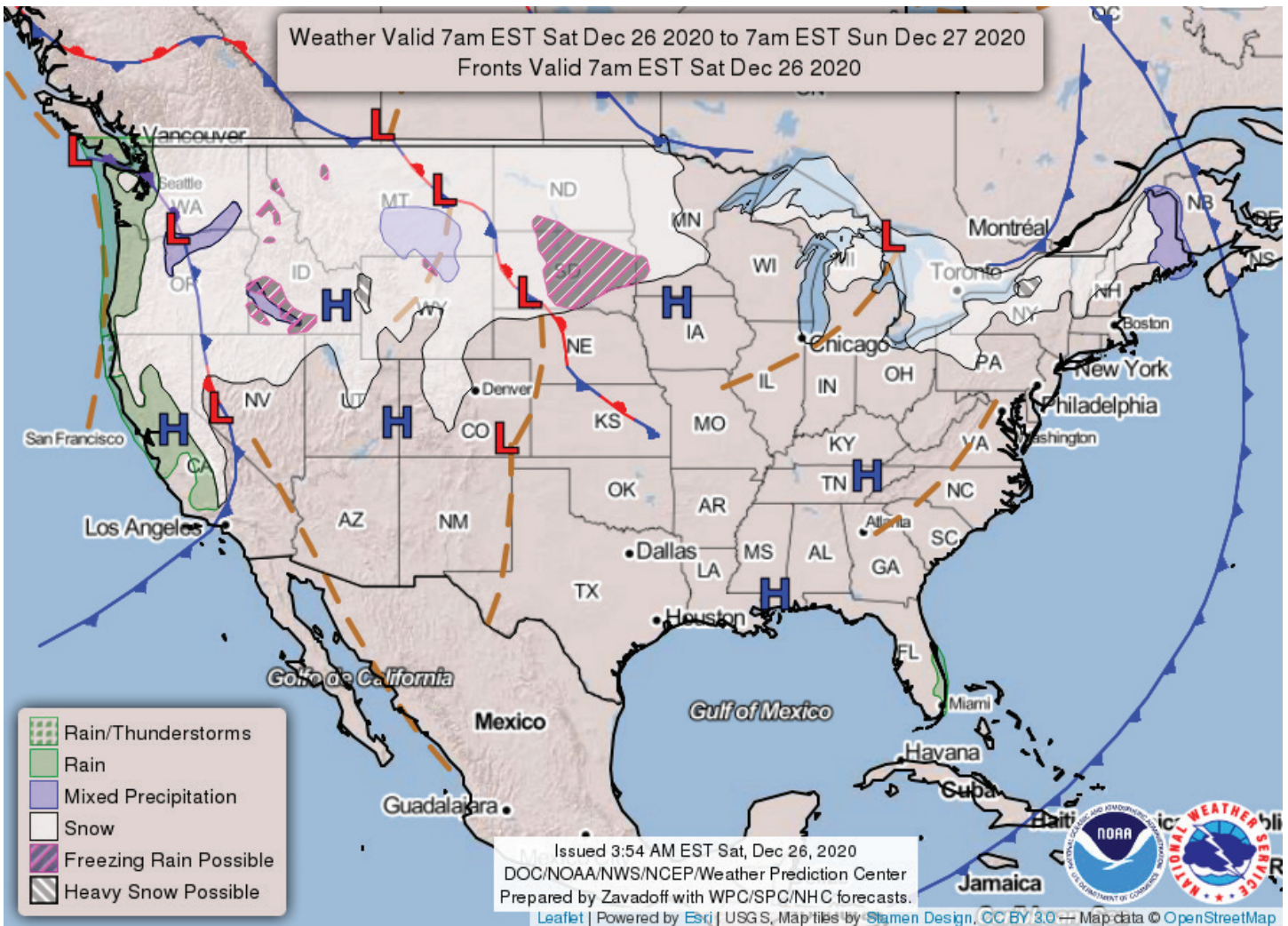
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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

**High Temp: 36 °F at 4:00 PM**  
**Low Temp: 4 °F at 12:57 AM**  
**Wind: 18 mph at 4:41 AM**  
**Precip: .00**

## Today's Info

**Record High: 53° in 2011**  
**Record Low: -29° in 1990**  
**Average High: 23°F**  
**Average Low: 3°F**  
**Average Precip in Dec.: 0.41**  
**Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00**  
**Average Precip to date: 21.61**  
**Precip Year to Date: 16.52**  
**Sunset Tonight: 4:57 p.m.**  
**Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:13 a.m.**



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## CHRIST'S DAY

On Mother's Day, we focus all of our attention on our Mothers, recalling and remembering how much they struggled to raise us. Lovingly we shower gifts on them, purchase cards that describe her many sacrifices for us, and the unending care she gave to us. She deserves all of the attention and recognition we can give her.

On Father's Day, we turn our thoughts to "Dad" – what he has done for us and then express our gratitude to him for the time he spent with us. We recall his efforts to teach us to throw a ball, catch a pass, cast a fishing line or attend a special event. He, too, deserves all the attention and recognition we can give him.

We also give recognition and attention to our Grandparents, to brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles and friends and relatives on their special days.

But what will we do that is really special or unique to show our appreciation and gratitude for Jesus on His day this year?

Will there be an envelope under the tree with a special love-offering that recognizes His importance in our lives? Will it match the amount we gave others?

Will we sacrifice some of our time to show God's love by being with those who would otherwise be alone and lonely on His day?

Will we share a meal with someone who is hungry? Give some clothes to those who are cold and have little? Spend time reading His story to children?

"In as much as you have done it to the least of these, you have done it unto Me!"

Prayer: Take Your peace from us Father, until and unless we show others Your love on Your day. Why? "In as much as you have done to others, you did to Me." In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Matthew 25:40 And the King will answer and say to them, "Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me."



## News from the Associated Press

### Sanford Health looking to move on after turbulent month

By JONATHAN ELLIS Sioux Falls Argus Leader

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — As he addressed his employees and guests one day this month, Sanford Health's new president and CEO Bill Gassen said he hoped the vaccines that were about to be administered to his first employees would help the world turn a corner on the coronavirus pandemic.

It was also a chance for Sanford to turn the corner on a tumultuous month.

Sanford's vaccination ceremony was typical pomp and circumstance for an organization that has loomed large in Sioux Falls and South Dakota. An organization that has thrown lavish parties, hosted famous musicians and planted new buildings around the city over the last decade. A heavyweight in the city's business community, Sanford has also been a generous source of philanthropy to the region's nonprofits and universities.

But even the Sanford's of the world can have a bad run. And the ceremony was the organization's opportunity to move on from a hectic and disorienting month, one that included the departure of its longtime leader following a public relations debacle, a monetary fine related to a surgeon accused of performing unnecessary surgeries, the shuttering of a much-ballyhooed merger deal with another hospital system and the departure of its chief medical officer "to pursue new opportunities."

Amid this was the backdrop of a global pandemic.

When he sat down with his counterpart from Intermountain Health on Oct. 26 to announce Sanford's merger with Intermountain, former Sanford CEO and president Kelby Krabbenhoft had the full backing of his board to create a \$15 billion a year health system. The merger hadn't been Krabbenhoft freelancing on his own. His board and executive team had been involved in the merger details.

It was big news for the local communities with Sanford and Intermountain facilities, and it was news in an industry that has seen rapid consolidation. The merger would create a sprawling system from Nevada to the Upper Great Plains, with pockets for future expansion in the Rocky Mountains, the Sioux Falls Argus Leader reported.

As he went through the details of the merger, Krabbenhoft nonchalantly mentioned that the new entity would be headquartered in Salt Lake City, Utah. It didn't matter, he said, where the new system would be chartered and headquartered.

But there were many in the city's business community who didn't share Krabbenhoft's casual indifference to that detail. Losing the headquarters would likely mean a loss of jobs in Sioux Falls, which was bad. But even worse, it would mean a loss of prestige for the city, with Sioux Falls becoming a mere outpost in a large medical empire.

The significance of that was not lost on the political establishment in South Dakota, including the governor's office. For a state that has touted its business-friendly environment for decades, South Dakota has struggled to attract large companies to locate here, even among industries that would fit in with the state's culture, such as agriculture and firearms. Losing the headquarters of a regional health system was not optimum, even if Krabbenhoft said it wasn't a big deal.

Three weeks after the merger announcement, Krabbenhoft and Gassen were guest speakers at the Downtown Rotary Club, where they explained the upcoming merger to a group whose membership includes the city's business elite.

During the conversation, Krabbenhoft talked about Sanford's role in the business community, with its commitment over the years to funding economic development efforts, universities and nonprofits.

"I never want to be seen as someone who just did a little bit," he said. "I wanted our organization, if we were going to be a community leader, to act like one."

Suddenly, Krabbenhoft veered onto a subject that irritated him. A week earlier, the board at the Minnehaha Country Club had decided not to approve a two-year extension to the Sanford Invitational golf



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tournament. The board made the decision after the club's voting members deadlocked on the extension. Krabbenhoft said the decision was ironic given Sanford's role as community benefactor.

"To vote not to extend it there because some tee times were interrupted for seven days, it was very difficult to swallow," he said, adding that Fargo, North Dakota would be happy to host the tournament.

The Minnehaha Country Club vote had been about more than just a few days of tee times. Those members who opposed the extension argued the economic losses to hosting the event outweighed the money the club received. The event itself, as well as the weeks of set-up and tear down, disrupted the club and closed a window of golf in a state where good weather is a scarcity. Some members were also not impressed with the extensive branding of Sanford around the club.

The vote was a rare rebuke to Sanford, and Krabbenhoft.

Two days later, he wrote the email.

It wasn't just that he questioned the use of masks, which he pointed out have become a symbol, it was the tone of the email. There were 593 people with COVID-19 in state hospitals that day, just 14 shy of the peak. In the past week before, 10,000 people had tested positive and more than 100 had died.

The following day, he told the Argus Leader in an interview that the worst of the pandemic would soon be over – which has so far proven true. He also rejected the need for mask mandates.

"At this point, we feel we've got this under control," he said. "There's not a crisis."

But that's not what his beleaguered frontline health workers were thinking as they tended to hundreds of sick patients. In an extraordinary move, Sanford's executive team, the one that had been handpicked by Krabbenhoft over the years, broke with him in a public email to Sanford's employees.

At that point it was probably a foregone conclusion Krabbenhoft was a goner. The only thing that could have saved him would have been a public apology and a plea for mercy. But anyone who knows Kelby Krabbenhoft knows he's not one to put his tail between his legs.

The end came on Nov. 26. Krabbenhoft and Sanford issued independent statements, with Krabbenhoft framing it as a retirement. The board named Gassen as his replacement. Significantly, Gassen was not named as an interim leader.

With Krabbenhoft's departure, with a raging pandemic, with employee dissatisfaction, with all the noise, it wasn't the right time to go through with the Intermountain merger, and Sanford bailed on Dec. 4.

Less than a week later, Sanford parted ways with its chief medical officer, Dr. Allison Suttle. A statement from the health system said Suttle was leaving to "pursue new opportunities." It was the capstone to a turbulent 44 days for one of the region's largest employers.

Gassen has focused his early weeks at reconciling the hospital system's leadership with its employees. On Thanksgiving he visited hospital workers who were busy tending to sick patients.

And he thanked them again at the vaccination ceremony. He also let them know that the first rounds of vaccines were for the workers in the trenches and Sanford's patients. Not for him or his executive team.

"We're going to do so at the right time," he said. "We're going to take our proper place in the line."

## SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Mega Millions

17-23-36-69-70, Mega Ball: 19, Megaplier: 2

(seventeen, twenty-three, thirty-six, sixty-nine, seventy; Mega Ball: nineteen; Megaplier: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$352 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$341 million

## Man killed, teen wounded in separate Rapid City shootings

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — Rapid City authorities say one man was killed in a Thursday night shooting

and a teen was wounded by a police officer after refusing to put down a shotgun early Friday morning. "This is definitely not the news we'd like to be delivering on Christmas Day," Police Chief Don Hedrick said in a Facebook video recorded at 5:55 a.m. Friday at the scene of the second incident.

The police shooting happened after a traffic stop about 3:45 a.m. Friday. One of the occupants ran from the vehicle and a second person, later identified as a 15-year-old boy, got out of the car holding a shotgun. The officer "asked repeatedly" for the teen to drop the shotgun and he refused, Hedrick said.

Hedrick said the officer fired and the boy fell to the ground. The officer provided first aid before medics brought him to the hospital, the Rapid City Journal reported. His condition is not known.

The person who fled has not been located but is not considered a danger to the community, Hedrick said.

The fatal shooting was reported just after 11 p.m. Thursday, when officers arriving on scene found a 31-year-old man lying in the street. Officers began providing aid to the man but he later died at the hospital, Hedrick said.

## South Dakota outdoor recreation thrives despite pandemic

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Wildlife officials say South Dakota's outdoor recreation economy boomed in 2020, providing much-needed sales in several business sectors as well as hopes of reversing a long-term decline in the number of licensed hunters and anglers.

The state waived entry fees and did not collect visitor information for almost two months at the start of the coronavirus pandemic. Even so, state park visitation in 2020 has been roughly 31% higher than it was in 2019, said Al Nedved, deputy director of the South Dakota Game Fish and Parks Department's parks division.

"It was pretty evident early on that the outdoors were going to be a place where people could exercise or just relax or whatever they like to do and do it safely," Nedved said.

For the first time in several years, hunting and fishing license sales to state residents increased in South Dakota. Together, resident hunting and fishing license sales rose 6.7%, and roughly one-quarter of 2020 licenses were sold to hunters or anglers who had not bought a license since at least 2017, the Sioux Falls Argus Leader reported.

Meanwhile, classes on everything from archery to plant identification have been filling up quickly when staff at the Game, Fish & Parks Department Outdoor Campus in Sioux Falls post them online, said campus director David Parker.

## Virus cancels annual Dakota ride, but some headed to Mankato

MANKATO, Minn. (AP) — An annual trek to Mankato to remember tribal members who were executed following the U.S.-Dakota war has been officially canceled due to the coronavirus, although a small group of horseback riders is making the journey anyway.

The annual Dakota 38 + 2 Memorial Ride begins when some Dakota riders start a 330-mile journey from Lower Brule, South Dakota, to Mankato. Other riders, as well as runners, join them along the way.

They eventually gather on Dec. 26 at Reconciliation Park near the Blue Earth County Library to honor the 38 Dakota killed in a mass hanging on the site that day in 1862. They also remember two chiefs who were kidnapped from Canada three years later, brought back to the U.S. and executed.

Despite the cancellation, at least some riders have been making their way to Mankato. They set up their camp in a park in Lake Crystal on Wednesday night after riding from St. James in the blizzard, the Mankato Free Press reported.

The event, attended by large crowds of area residents, features Dakota songs and prayers, often delivered in the Dakota language.

Besides honoring their ancestors, the ride and run are part of an ongoing reconciliation between the Dakota and area residents.

## Experts say experience convinced Midwest of virus dangers

By STEPHEN GROVES and JOSH FUNK Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — As much of the country experiences spiking virus rates, a reprieve from a devastating surge of the coronavirus in the Upper Midwest has given cautious relief to health officials, though they worry that infections remain rampant and holiday gatherings could reignite the worst outbreaks of the pandemic.

States in the northern stretches of the Midwest and Great Plains saw the nation's worst rates of coronavirus infections in the weeks before Thanksgiving, stretching hospitals beyond capacity and leading to states such as North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa and Wisconsin reporting some of the nation's highest deaths per capita during November.

But over the last two weeks, those states have seen their average daily cases drop, with decreases ranging from 20% in Iowa to as much as 66% in North Dakota, according to Johns Hopkins researchers. Since the middle of November, the entire region has returned to levels similar to those seen in October.

"We're in a place where we've controlled the fire, but it would be very easy for it to flare up again if conditions were right," said Ryan Demmer, an epidemiologist at the University of Minnesota School of Public Health.

For a region that was a harbinger of the virus waves that now plague much of the country, the positive direction in the Midwest offers hope that people can rally to take virus precautions seriously as they await vaccines during what experts think will be the final months of the pandemic.

Governors have used the declining numbers to justify their divergent approaches to fighting the pandemic, even jousting at times. In Minnesota, Gov. Tim Walz, a Democrat, has defended keeping some restrictions in place through early January, saying limits on bars and restaurants are working. In neighboring South Dakota, Republican Gov. Kristi Noem has argued the opposite, using the recent decline in numbers in her state to argue that mask mandates don't make a difference.

But some epidemiologists believe the most compelling factor for many who redoubled their efforts to prevent infections may be that they experienced the virus on a personal level. As the pandemic crept into communities across the Midwest, more people had loved ones, friends or acquaintances fall ill or die.

"It's fox hole religion — the whole thing gets a lot more real when the guy next to you gets shot," said Dr. Christine Petersen, the director of the Center for Emerging Infectious Diseases at the University of Iowa. "All of a sudden, your local hospital is full, and your sister, aunt, or grandmother is in the hospital."

Roughly one of out every 278 people across northern states spanning from Wisconsin to Montana required hospital care for COVID-19, according to data from the COVID Tracking Project. In tight-knit communities, those experiences hit home.

The virus outbreak was so widespread by early November that nearly everyone has known someone severely affected by COVID-19, said Dr. James Lawler with the University of Nebraska Medical Center's Global Center for Health Security.

"That seems to bring things home in a way that just talking about it earlier did not," he said, noting that he's observed more people wearing face masks, as well as avoiding gatherings, parties and indoor dining.

Until the fall, the Upper Midwest had not seen the widespread outbreaks and high death rates that other parts of the country experienced in the early months of the pandemic. Many took lax approaches to virus mitigation measures. Republican governors in the region eschewed government mandates for mask-wearing or other efforts to prevent infections.

Many health experts warned that the region was ripe for widespread infections, especially as the weather cooled and people gathered inside, making it easier for the coronavirus to spread.

"Once the snowball started, it took everybody down," Petersen said. "We knew that this was coming. It was those who took the precautions and doubled down that did slightly better, but we knew it was going to be hard, no matter what."

Petersen credited the renewed efforts to slow infections to a combination of factors: warnings from health officials and medical workers that hospitals were filling; some Republican governors issuing orders

to wear masks; and the lived experience of the pandemic. Other experts say some pockets of people, such as those who work in meatpacking plants where infections were widespread, had experienced such high rates of infections that the virus has slowed.

But across the region, many worried that the success in avoiding a Thanksgiving spike could be undone by Christmas and New Year's celebrations. Petersen worried that people had decided to forgo Thanksgiving gatherings, only to have family celebrations on Christmas. As a Midwesterner, she acknowledged that the draw to gather with family on holidays was difficult to resist.

"I hope a lot of us aren't feeling guilty in a few weeks," she said.

Funk reported from Norfolk, Nebraska. Steve Karnowski in Minneapolis contributed to this report.

## **Virus besets Belarus prisons filled with president's critics**

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — A wave of COVID-19 has engulfed prisons in Belarus that are packed with people in custody for demonstrating against the nation's authoritarian president, and some of the protesters who contracted the coronavirus while incarcerated accuse authorities of neglecting or even encouraging infections.

Activists who spoke to The Associated Press after their release described massively overcrowded cells without proper ventilation or basic amenities and a lack of medical treatment.

Kastus Lisetsky, 35, a musician who received a 15-day sentence for attending a protest, said he was hospitalized with a high fever after eight days at a prison in eastern Belarus and diagnosed with double-sided pneumonia induced by COVID-19.

"Humid walls covered by parasites, the shocking lack of sanitary measures, shivering cold and a rusting bed —that was what I got in prison in Mogilev instead of medical assistance," Lisetsky told the AP in a telephone interview. "I had a fever and lost consciousness, and the guards had to call an ambulance."

Lisetsky said that before he entered prison, he and three bandmates were held in a Minsk jail and had to sleep on the floor of a cell intended for only two people. All four have contracted the virus. Lisetsky must return to prison to serve the remaining seven days of his sentence after he's discharged from the hospital.

He accused the government of allowing the virus to run wild among those jailed for political reasons.

"The guards say openly that they do it deliberately on orders," Lisetsky said.

More than 30,000 people have been detained for taking part in protests against the August reelection of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko in a vote that opposition activists and some election workers say was rigged to give Lukashenko a sixth term.

Police have repeatedly broken up peaceful protests with clubs and stun grenades. The alleged vote-rigging and the brutal crackdown on demonstrations have prompted the United States and the European Union to introduce sanctions against Belarusian officials.

Opposition candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who placed second in the presidential election and was forced to leave the country after she challenged the official results giving Lukashenko 80% of the vote, urged foreign leaders and international organizations to intervene to help stem the coronavirus outbreak in Belarus' prisons.

"In the center of Europe, inmates are being deliberately infected with coronavirus," Tsikhanouskaya told The Associated Press. "They move the infected people from one cell to another, and the cells are overcrowded and lack ventilation. It's an atrocity, it can only be assessed as abuse and torture."

Authorities haven't released the number of prisoners with COVID-19, but rights activists say that thousands of protesters tested positive after they were detained.

"The horrible condition of Belarus' penitentiary system has contributed to an outbreak of COVID-19 in prisons, but the authorities haven't even tried to improve the situation and have put thousands of activists on that conveyor," Valiantsin Stefanovic, vice chairman of the Viasna rights center, said.

Artsiom Liava, a 44-year-old journalist, said he got infected last month while awaiting a court hearing in a jail cell intended to accommodate 10 but housing about 100 inmates. Liava was detained while he was



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covering a protest in the Belarusian capital, Minsk, for the independent Belsat TV channel.

"First, fellow inmates and then me stopped feeling the prison stench," he told The Associated Press. "All of us had a fever, strong cough and were feeling feeble, but they weren't giving us even hot water."

Liava said that after receiving a 15-day sentence, he was moved to different jails and prisons in Minsk and nearby towns as authorities struggled to house inmates in overcrowded detention facilities. He said he witnessed similar conditions in all of them — cellmates coughing or experiencing difficulty breathing, and prison wardens treating them with emphatic neglect.

"It was like a mockery, doctors weren't responding to pleas and complaints," Liava said. "It was forbidden to lie down during daytime and mattresses were folded up. We all felt exhausted, but we were forced to stay seated on iron beds in the basement without any access to fresh air."

The journalist said he didn't get a single dose of medicine during his stint behind bars. The day after he left prison, Liava said, he tested positive for COVID-19, and a CT scan showed that his lungs were badly affected.

"Prison doctors should be prosecuted for negligence. They put our lives in danger by refusing us (basic) medical treatment," said Liava, who had a strong cough and was breathing with difficulty while speaking to the AP.

Belarus has reported more than 180,000 confirmed coronavirus cases since the start of the pandemic, but many in the ex-Soviet republic of 9.4 million people suspect authorities of manipulating statistics to hide the true scope of the country's outbreaks.

Lukashenko cavalierly dismissed the coronavirus early during the pandemic, shrugging off the fear and national lockdowns the new bug had caused as "psychosis" and advising citizens to avoid catching it by driving tractors in the field, drinking vodka and visiting saunas. His attitude has angered many Belarusians, adding to the public dismay over his authoritarian style and helping fuel the post-election protests.

Ihar Hotsin, a doctor working at a top oncology hospital in Minsk, was detained when he joined a rally of medical workers opposing the crackdown on demonstrations. He said he and four of his colleagues who were arrested all contracted the virus in custody.

Hotsin, 30, believes he got infected at the prison in the city of Baranovichi where he was held in a 12-square-meter (129-square-foot) cell together with about 80 other inmates.

"Five doctors from our hospital were detained, and all five tested positive for COVID-19 after being released, a 100% rate," Hotsin said. "We must cry out loud about an outbreak of COVID-19 in jails overcrowded with political prisoners."

Follow AP's virus pandemic coverage at:

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## 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.

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

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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. She 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](http://www.twitter.com/MikeBalsamo1).

## Trump made lasting impact on federal courts

By MARK SHERMAN, KEVIN FREKING and MATTHEW DALY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — On this, even President Donald Trump's most fevered critics agree: he has left a deep imprint on the federal courts that will outlast his one term in office for decades to come.

He used the promise of conservative judicial appointments to win over Republican skeptics as a candidate. Then as president, he relied on outside conservative legal organizations and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell to employ an assembly line-like precision to install more than 230 judges on the federal bench, including the three newest justices of the Supreme Court. Trump never tired of boasting about it.

Indeed, undeterred by Democratic criticism, the Senate was still confirming judges more than a month after Trump lost his reelection bid to Joe Biden.

"Trump has basically done more than any president has done in a single term since (President Jimmy) Carter to put his stamp on the judiciary," said Jonathan Adler, a law professor at Case Western Reserve University School of Law in Cleveland, Ohio, adding that Congress created around 150 new judgeships during Carter's presidency.

The impact will be enduring. Among the Trump-appointed judges, who hold lifetime positions, several are still in their 30s. The three Supreme Court picks could still be on the court at the 21st century's midpoint, 30 years from now.

Beyond the Supreme Court, 30 percent of the judges on the nation's court of appeals, where all but a handful of cases reach their end, were appointed by Trump.

But numbers don't tell the entire story. The real measure of what Trump has been able to do will be revealed in countless court decisions in the years to come on abortion, guns, religious rights and a host of other culture wars issues.

When it came to the president's own legal challenges of the election results, however, judges who have

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him to thank for their position rebuffed his claims. But in many other important ways, his success with judicial appointments already is paying dividends for conservatives.

When the Supreme Court blocked New York from enforcing certain limits on attendance at churches and synagogues in areas designated as hard hit by COVID-19, Justice Amy Coney Barrett, the newest member of the court, cast the decisive fifth vote. Previously, the court had allowed restrictions on religious services over the dissent of four justices, including the other two Trump nominees, Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh.

Five Trump appointees were in the majority of the 6-4 decision by the full 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in September that made it harder for felons in Florida to regain the right to vote. The Atlanta-based court had a majority of Democratic-appointed judges when Trump took office.

Last month, Judges Britt Grant and Barbara Lagoa, both named by Trump, formed the majority on a three-judge 11th circuit panel that struck down local Florida bans on therapy that seeks to change the sexual orientation of LGBTQ minors. Other appeals courts around the country have upheld the conversion therapy bans.

In one early look at Trump's appointees to federal trial courts, political science professors Kenneth Manning, Robert Carp and Lisa Holmes compared their decisions with more than 117,000 opinions published dating back to 1932.

"Trump has appointed judges who exhibit a distinct decision-making pattern that is, on the whole, significantly more conservative than previous presidents," the political scientists concluded in an October 2020 working paper.

The one constant of the past four years — through impeachment, the coronavirus pandemic and Trump's election loss — has been his nomination of and Senate confirmation of judges.

The president has had several partners in the judicial effort, but none more important than McConnell, who takes particular pride in reshaping the Supreme Court.

"I think it's far and away the most consequential thing I've ever been involved in," the 78-year-old McConnell said in an interview. "And it's the most long-lasting accomplishment of the current administration, by far."

They might not have called it a partnership at the time, but their mutually reinforcing work began even before Trump's election in 2016.

Trump used the issue of the federal judiciary to win trust with voters who might have questions about the conservative credentials of a billionaire real estate developer who had once supported abortion rights and did not have a track record in politics.

He put in writing a list of potential nominees, provided by the conservative Federalist Society and Heritage Foundation, he would select from in filling a Supreme Court vacancy.

Kellyanne Conway, who served as his campaign manager in 2016, said it was a move that people who had been in office for years and wanted to ascend to the presidency "didn't have the courage to do, which is name names."

As it happens, there was a high court opening at the time, following the death of Justice Antonin Scalia in February.

Enter McConnell. The Republican blocked President Barack Obama's nomination of Merrick Garland, refusing so much as a hearing for the respected appeals court judge whom Republicans had previously identified as a high court nominee they could support.

It was a gamble at a time when Trump's electoral prospects seemed dim, but it paid off with his stunning victory over Hillary Clinton.

And the high court seat wasn't the only one waiting to be filled when Trump took office in January 2017. One hundred four judgeships were open after Republicans used their Senate majority to grind the nomination process to a near halt in Obama's final two years in office. Only 28.6% of his nominees were confirmed in that stretch.

The pace quickened almost immediately. Republicans moved with an urgency on confirmations that hasn't let up. In Trump's first two years, they pushed through 30 appellate court judges and 53 district court

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nominees. It was the highest number of appellate court confirmations in a two-year period since Ronald Reagan and nearly double the number that Obama secured in his first two years.

McConnell and top Republicans on the Senate Judiciary Committee eliminated rules that had allowed the opposition party to delay confirmations, most notably requiring just a simple majority, instead of 60 votes, to move Supreme Court nominees. Democrats, bitter over the stalled Garland nomination, otherwise would have blocked Gorsuch's confirmation in April 2017.

Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse, D-RI, a member of the Senate Judiciary Committee and a sharp Trump critic, said Trump's judicial legacy "is a lot less about what he's done than what he's allowed others to do in his name."

Whitehouse said Trump essentially "outsourced" judicial nominations to McConnell and the Federalist Society, specifically the group's leader Leonard Leo and former White House counsel Don McGahn, a Federalist Society member who made judicial nominations a top priority.

At the same time, the Federalist Society and other conservative groups, including the Judicial Crisis Network and Americans for Prosperity, have taken millions of dollars in anonymous donations and waged public and behind-the-scenes campaigns for right-wing judges, Whitehouse said.

Trump "opened the channel for special-interest interference in judicial selection. That I think is very novel and obviously lends itself to corruption," Whitehouse said. "Right wing forces have for decades sought the kind of influence in judicial nominations that the Trump administration outright gave them."

McConnell scoffed at the criticism. "The reason a lot of them belong to the Federalist Society is because that is sort of the core mission of the Federalist Society -- to get the courts back to doing what they're supposed to do and not legislate from the bench," he said.

On the campaign trail and at White House events, Trump would often cite his record on judicial appointments as an example of accomplishment, while ignoring the obstructions that occurred during the Obama years.

"You know, when I got in, we had over 100 federal judges that weren't appointed. Now, I don't know why Obama left that. It was like a big, beautiful present to all of us. Why the hell did he leave that? Maybe he got complacent," Trump boasted at one point, omitting the essential fact that McConnell had blocked Obama's nominees.

The high court vacancy at the start of Trump's term was, in essence, a gift from McConnell. Justice Anthony Kennedy's decision to retire in 2018 allowed Trump to replace the court's swing justice with the more conservative Kavanaugh, who survived his own bruising confirmation hearings that included allegations he sexually assaulted a woman when they were both in high school decades ago. Kavanaugh denied the claims.

Less than two months before the 2020 election, Trump was handed another opening with the death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Trump and Senate Republicans didn't hesitate. He nominated Barrett even before Ginsburg was buried at Arlington National Cemetery and McConnell ensured the confirmation was done before the election.

The Senate has continued confirming Trump nominees even after his defeat for reelection, breaking a norm that has stood since 1900 with one exception, said Russell Wheeler, a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution. Federal prosecutor Thomas Kirsch was confirmed as Barrett's replacement on the federal appeals court based in Chicago on Dec. 15, on a mostly party-line vote.

The exception was the Senate's bipartisan acceptance in 1980 of a former Senate staff member as a federal appeals court judge. That nominee was Stephen Breyer, now a Supreme Court justice.

Along with the question of legacy is whether Trump's record on judges spurs major changes to the judiciary.

Wheeler, at Brookings, said one of the most striking features of the teamwork of Trump and McConnell is that they acted as though they had the support of most Americans. They did not, he said.

"My main beef with this current group is that there's just no mandate to turn the judiciary so far to the right," Wheeler said. "Trump lost the popular vote massively in 2016, but nevertheless has behaved as if



he had a mandate to reshape the federal judiciary at the Supreme Court and Court of Appeals level and I think that's just unfounded."

Liberal groups already have been pushing for changes at the highest level, including expansion of the Supreme Court and term limits for justices. The political prospects for both ideas are uncertain, at best.

But there's less doubt from any vantage point about what Trump has wrought.

The U.S. "will be living with the legacy of Donald Trump for decades to come as a result of his judicial appointments," said Brian Fallon, executive director of Demand Justice, a liberal advocacy group. People who accepted judicial appointments from Trump will "wear the moniker of 'Trump judge' for the rest of their lives," Fallon said.

Not so, in Conway's view. "It will be one of the most lasting pieces of his legacy, distinguished and durable," she said.

## Kamara's 6 TDs tie NFL record; Saints beat Vikings 52-33

By BRETT MARTEL AP Sports Writer

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — Alvin Kamara expects a fine for wearing a pair of Christmas-themed shoes that, as it turned out, would also be worthy of a Hall of Fame display.

With a red shoe on his right foot and a green one on his left, Kamara tied an NFL record set in 1929 by running for six touchdowns in a game. He finished with a career-high 155 yards rushing to help New Orleans beat the Minnesota Vikings 52-33 on Friday and clinch a fourth straight NFC South title.

"It just feels good to have one of those days, just for the team," Kamara said, showering credit on the offensive line and insisting that he did "the small part."

"I'm not focused on personal, like, goals and yards and stuff like that," Kamara continued. "As long as the team has success, then personal success will come."

And it has come all season for Kamara, who during training camp signed a five-year contract worth up to \$75 million. He has since set Saints records for rushing TDs in a season with 16 and total TDs with 21 (he has five receiving).

As for wearing shoes that didn't conform to the NFL's uniform codes, Kamara said, "If they fine me, whatever it is, I'll just match it and donate to charity. You know, the Grinch always tries to steal Christmas."

Kamara slipped a couple tackle attempts and then sprinted into the clear for a 40-yard touchdown on the game's opening drive. He added scoring runs of 1, 5, 6, 7 and 3 yards against a Minnesota defensive front hit hard by injuries, and equaled Hall of Fame fullback Ernie Nevers' achievement.

Minnesota (6-9) was eliminated from playoff contention while allowing the most points by any Vikings team since 1963.

"They just mashed us up front," Vikings coach Mike Zimmer said, calling his defense "the worst one I've ever had" as a coach. "We couldn't slow them down. It would be 8-yard gain, 7-yard gain."

The Saints (11-4) never punted, and set a record of yards gained in a game by a Vikings opponent with 583.

Saints coach Sean Payton said it felt like a CFL game, with many first-down conversions coming before New Orleans even got to third down. The Saints might have won by a greater margin if not for two interceptions of Drew Brees, one of them on a pass that deflected off receiver Emmanuel Sanders' hands.

Brees completed 19 of 26 throws for 311 yards in his second game back from rib and lung injuries that had sidelined him for four games.

Sanders had four catches for 83 yards, while tight end Jared Cook caught three passes for 82 yards. New Orleans' 264 yards rushing were the most by a Vikings opponent in Zimmer's seven seasons.

New Orleans native Irv Smith Jr. caught a pair of touchdown passes in the third quarter for the Vikings, the second pulling Minnesota to 31-27. But the Saints responded with two short touchdown runs by Kamara and one by reserve QB Taysom Hill in the fourth quarter to put the game out of reach.

Kirk Cousins passed for 283 yards and three touchdowns for the Vikings, who never led and trailed for good after Kamara's second TD in the first quarter.

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## HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Kamara equaled a record Nevers set for the Cardinals way back when they called Chicago home.

"It was awesome," Brees said. "Six touchdowns for a running back is just astounding."

Saints players celebrated the last TD by pretending to make snow angels on the Superdome turf, which center Erik McCoy planned during the final drive as something that stuck with the Christmas theme.

Payton, who spent part of his youth in the Chicago area, was thinking about Gale Sayers' six-TD game (four rushing, two receiving) against San Francisco in 1965 when he called the play that led to Kamara's sixth TD with just less than two minutes left.

"I'd say most of these players have no idea how good Gale Sayers was," Payton said, adding that Kamara's TD total "was a big deal. He played fantastic."

## MOMENTUM PLAY

In a game that saw both defenses struggle, Saints receiver Marquez Callaway made a play that any defensive back would appreciate when he prevented Eric Wilson from intercepting a pass Brees threw right at the linebacker. With a second chance, Brees hit Callaway for 11 yards on the next play and then found Cook 19 yards to the Vikings 6. That set up Kamara's third TD run of the half to put New Orleans up 24-14.

## INJURIES

Vikings: Minnesota did not report any injuries.

Saints: LB Kwon Alexander injured his right ankle late in the third quarter. He was initially helped off the field but later took a cart from the sideline to the locker room.

## UP NEXT

Vikings: visit Detroit on Jan. 3, the final Sunday of the regular season.

Saints: visit Carolina on Jan. 3.

More AP NFL: <https://apnews.com/NFL> and [https://twitter.com/AP\\_NFL](https://twitter.com/AP_NFL)

## Trump golfs in Florida as COVID relief hangs in the balance

By JILL COLVIN Associated Press

PALM BEACH, Fla. (AP) — President Donald Trump spent his Christmas golfing in Florida as a government shutdown looms and COVID relief hangs in the balance.

Trump, at his Mar-a-Lago club in Palm Beach for the holidays, had no events on his public schedule after throwing the future of a massive COVID relief and government funding bill into question. Failure to sign the bill, which arrived in Florida on Thursday night, could deny relief checks to millions of Americans on the brink and force a government shutdown in the midst of the pandemic.

The White House declined to share details of the president's schedule, though he played golf Friday with South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham, a close ally.

White House spokesman Judd Deere said Trump was briefed on the explosion in downtown Nashville early Friday that authorities said appeared to be intentional, but the president said nothing publicly about it in the hours after.

Trump tweeted that he planned to make "a short speech to service members from all over the world" by video conference Friday to celebrate the holiday, but declared: "Fake News not invited!" Without giving details, the White House said only that Trump would work "tirelessly" during the holidays and has "many meetings and calls."

Trump's vacation 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 he refuses to sign the deal, which is attached to a \$1.4 trillion government funding bill, it will force a federal

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government shutdown, in addition to delaying aid checks and halting unemployment benefits and eviction protections in the most dire stretch of the pandemic.

"Made many calls and had meetings at Trump International in Palm Beach, Florida. Why would politicians not want to give people \$2000, rather than only \$600?" he tweeted after leaving the golf course Friday afternoon. "It wasn't their fault, it was China. Give our people the money!"

Graham tweeted Friday night that Trump was still intent on getting changes in yearend legislation before signing it.

"After spending some time with President @realDonaldTrump today, I am convinced he is more determined than ever to increase stimulus payments to \$2000 per person and challenge Section 230 big tech liability protection." he said in his tweet "Both are reasonable demands, and I hope Congress is listening. The biggest winner would be the American people."

In addition to the COVID aid, Graham was referring to another Trump priority: to get a repeal of Section 230 of the 1996 Communications Decency Act, a law that protects online platforms from liability for content posted by users.

Trump's decision to attack the COVID bill has been seen, at least in part, as political punishment for what he considers insufficient backing by congressional Republicans of his campaign to overturn the results of the Nov. 3 election with unfounded claims of voter fraud.

"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 Thursday.

"I will NEVER FORGET!" he later added.

Trump for weeks now has refused to accept the results of the election and has been pushing new, increasingly outrageous schemes to try to overturn the results. 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 has provided no credible evidence to support his election claims, which have been refuted by a long list of officials, among them judges, former Attorney General William Barr, Republican governors 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 going through the holidays alone or struggling to make ends meet without adequate income, food or shelter thanks to the pandemic's economic toll.

The Justice Department said Acting Attorney General Jeff Rosen also was briefed on the Nashville blast and directed that all department resources be made available to help. The FBI will be taking the lead in the investigation, agency spokesman Joel Siskovic said.

Three people were treated in hospitals after a recreational vehicle, blaring a recorded warning of an imminent detonation, exploded in Nashville's downtown. The blast caused widespread communications outages that took down police emergency systems and grounded flights at the city's airport.

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 call House lawmakers back to Washington for a vote Monday on Trump's \$2,000 proposal, though it would probably die in the Republican-controlled Senate. They are also considering a vote Monday on a stop-gap measure at least to avert a federal shutdown and keep the government running until Democrat Joe 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.

## After early success, S. Korea sleepwalks into virus crisis

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korea had seemed to be winning the fight against the coronavirus: Quickly ramping up its testing, contact-tracing and quarantine efforts paid off when it weathered an early outbreak without the economic pain of a lockdown. But a deadly resurgence has reached new heights during Christmas week, prompting soul-searching on how the nation sleepwalked into a crisis.

The 1,241 infections on Christmas Day were the largest daily increase. Another 1,132 cases were reported Saturday, bringing South Korea's caseload to 55,902.

Over 15,000 were added in the last 15 days alone. An additional 221 fatalities over the same period, the deadliest stretch, took the death toll to 793.

As the numbers keep rising, the shock to people's livelihoods is deepening and public confidence in the government eroding. Officials could decide to increase social distancing measures to maximum levels on Sunday, after resisting for weeks.

Tighter restrictions could be inevitable because transmissions have been outpacing efforts to expand hospital capacities.

In the greater Seoul area, more facilities have been designated for COVID-19 treatment and dozens of general hospitals have been ordered to allocate more ICUs for virus patients. Hundreds of troops have been deployed to help with contact tracing.

At least four patients have died at their homes or long-term care facilities while waiting for admission this month, said Kwak Jin, an official at the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency. The agency said 299 among 16,577 active patients were in serious or critical condition.

"Our hospital system isn't going to collapse, but the crush in COVID-19 patients has significantly hampered our response," said Choi Won Suk, an infectious disease professor at the Korea University Ansan Hospital, west of Seoul.

Choi said the government should have done more to prepare hospitals for a winter surge.

"We have patients with all kinds of serious illnesses at our ICUs and they can't share any space with COVID-19 patients, so it's hard," Choi said. "It's the same medical staff that has been fighting the virus for all these months. There's an accumulation of fatigue."

Critics say the government of President Moon Jae-in became complacent after swiftly containing the outbreak this spring that was centered in the southeastern city of Daegu.

The past weeks have underscored risks of putting economic concerns before public health when vaccines are at least months away. Officials had eased social distancing rules to their lowest in October, allowing high-risk venues like clubs and karaoke rooms to reopen, although experts were warning of a viral surge during winter when people spend longer hours indoors.

Jaehun Jung, a professor of preventive medicine at the Gachon University College of Medicine in Incheon, said he anticipates infections to gradually slow over the next two weeks.

The quiet streets and long lines snaking around testing stations in Seoul, which are temporarily providing free tests to anyone regardless of whether they have symptoms or clear reasons to suspect infections, demonstrate a return of public alertness following months of pandemic fatigue.

Officials are also clamping down on private social gatherings through Jan. 3, shutting down ski resorts, prohibiting hotels from selling more than half of their rooms and setting fines for restaurants if they accept groups of five or more people.

Still, lowering transmissions to the levels seen in early November — 100 to 200 a day — would be unrealistic, Jung said, anticipating the daily figure to settle around 300 to 500 cases.

The higher baseline might necessitate tightened social distancing until vaccines roll out — a dreadful



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outlook for low-income workers and the self-employed who drive the country's service sector, the part of the economy the virus has damaged the most.

"The government should do whatever to secure enough supplies and move up the administration of vaccines to the earliest possible point," Jung said.

South Korea plans to secure around 86 million doses of vaccines next year, which would be enough to cover 46 million people in a population of 51 million. The first supplies, which will be AstraZeneca vaccines produced by a local manufacturing partner, are expected to be delivered in February and March. Officials plan to complete vaccinating 60% to 70% of the population by around November.

There's disappointment the shots aren't coming sooner, though officials have insisted South Korea could afford a wait-and-see approach as its outbreak isn't as dire as in America or Europe.

South Korea's earlier success could be attributed to its experience in fighting a 2015 outbreak of MERS, the Middle East respiratory syndrome, caused by a different coronavirus.

After South Korea reported its first COVID-19 patient on Jan. 20, the KDCA was quick to recognize the importance of mass testing and sped up an approval process that had private companies producing millions of tests in just weeks.

When infections soared in the Daegu region in February and March, health authorities managed to contain the situation by April after aggressively mobilizing technological tools to trace contacts and enforce quarantines.

But that success was also a product of luck — most infections in Daegu were linked to a single church congregation. Health workers now are having a much harder time tracking transmissions in the populous capital area, where clusters are popping up just about everywhere.

South Korea has so far weathered its outbreak without lockdowns, but a decision on Sunday to raise distancing restrictions to the highest "Tier-3" could possibly shutter hundreds of thousands of non-essential businesses across the nation.

That could be for the best, said Yoo Eun-sun, who is struggling to pay rent for three small music tutoring academies she runs in Incheon and Siheung, also near Seoul, amid a dearth of students and on-and-off shutdowns.

"What parents would send their kids to piano lessons" unless transmissions decrease quickly and decisively, she said.

Yoo also feels that the government's middling approach to social distancing, which has targeted specific business activities while keeping the broader part of the economy open, has put an unfair financial burden on businesses like hers.

"Whether it's tutoring academies, gyms, yoga studios or karaokes, the same set of businesses are getting hit again and again," she said. "How long could we go on?"

## Downtown Nashville explosion knocks communications offline

By KIMBERLEE KRUESI, MICHAEL BALSAMO and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — A recreational vehicle parked in the deserted streets of downtown Nashville exploded early Christmas morning, causing widespread communications outages that took down police emergency systems and grounded holiday travel at the city's airport.

Police were responding to a report of shots fired Friday when they encountered the RV blaring a recorded warning that a bomb would detonate in 15 minutes, Metro Nashville Police Chief John Drake said. Police evacuated nearby buildings and called in the bomb squad. The RV exploded shortly afterward, Drake said.

"This morning's attack on our community was intended to create chaos and fear in this season of peace and hope. But Nashvillians have proven time and time again that the spirit of our city cannot be broken," Mayor John Cooper said at a news conference after issuing a curfew for the area.

Police believe the blast was intentional but don't yet know a motive or target, and Drake noted that officials had not received any threats before the explosion.

The chief said investigators at the scene "have found tissue that we believe could be remains, but we'll

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have that examined and let you know at that time." Police could not say whether it potentially came from someone inside the RV.

Three people taken to area hospitals for treatment were in stable condition Friday evening, Cooper said.

Surveillance video published on a Twitter account Friday that appeared to be across the street from the blast captured the warning issuing from the RV, "... if you can hear this message, evacuate now," seconds before the explosion.

The blast sent black smoke and flames billowing from the heart of downtown Nashville's tourist scene, an area packed with honky-tonks, restaurants and shops. Buildings shook and windows shattered streets away from the explosion near a building owned by AT&T that lies one block from the company's office tower, a landmark in downtown.

"We do not know if that was a coincidence, or if that was the intention," police spokesman Don Aaron said. He said earlier that some people were taken to the department's central precinct for questioning but declined to give details.

AT&T said the affected building is the central office of a telephone exchange, with network equipment in it. The blast interrupted service, but the company declined to say how widespread outages were.

The AT&T outages site showed service issues in middle Tennessee and Kentucky. Several police agencies reported that their 911 systems were down because of the outage, including Knox County, home to Knoxville about 180 miles (290 kilometers) east of Nashville.

AT&T said that it was bringing in portable cell sites and was working with law enforcement to get access to make repairs to its equipment. The company noted that "power is essential to restoring" service.

The Federal Aviation Administration temporarily halted flights out of Nashville International Airport because of telecommunications issues associated with the explosion.

The FBI will be taking the lead in the investigation, agency spokesman Joel Siskovic said. Federal investigators from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives were also on the scene. The FBI is the primary law enforcement agency responsible for investigating federal crimes, such as explosives violations and acts of terrorism.

A Philadelphia man staying in a nearby hotel said that when he heard the blast, he was knew it wasn't harmless.

"We tried to rationalize it that it was an earthquake or something, but it was obvious it wasn't an earthquake," Joseph Fafara said.

When he went to look at the damage, police barricades had already been put in place.

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 along with cries of people in distress. A fire is visible in the street outside.

McCoy said he heard gunfire 15 minutes before the explosion rocked his building, set cars in the street on fire and blew trees apart.

"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.

President Donald Trump has been briefed, according to White House spokesperson Judd Deere. The U.S. Justice Department said Acting Attorney General Jeff Rosen was also briefed and directed all department resources be made available to help with the investigation.

Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee said on Twitter that the state would provide the resources necessary "to determine what happened and who was responsible."

The American Red Cross of Tennessee announced that it was working with officials to open a shelter for victims.

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Associated Press writer Thalia Beaty in New York contributed. Balsamo and Tucker reported from Washington.

## **A pandemic Christmas: Services move online, people stay home**

By ELLIOT SPAGAT and FRANCES D'EMILIO Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Families that usually reunite on Christmas over a hearty, lingering meal celebrated apart Friday, services shifted online, and gift exchanges were low-key in one of the most unusual and subdued holiday seasons in decades.

The coronavirus left almost no one unaffected.

Patricia Hager, 60, delivered homemade caramel rolls for breakfast to family and friends in Bismarck, North Dakota, a state that didn't get hit until later in the pandemic but was struck hard. It seemed every time she opened her door this holiday season, someone had left smoked salmon, baskets of nuts or cookies.

"This year Christmas love is expressed at the door," she said. "I'm glad that people will probably be with us next year with the vaccines. I can give up anything for that."

With a child due in February, Song Ju-hyeon of Paju, South Korea, near Seoul, said home is the only place she feels safe. The government reported 1,241 new cases Friday, a new daily record for the country.

"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 surge in cases led to doctors ending a brief strike Christmas Eve. Celebrations were muted in the East African hub as a curfew prevented overnight church vigils.

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. Tourism in Italy has virtually vanished and the government's coronavirus restrictions for the holidays foiled any plans by locals to flock to the square.

Citing a cause for optimism, Francis said the development 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 vaccine.

Bells rang out around Bethlehem as the traditional birthplace of Jesus celebrated. 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 canceled Mass after China's capital was put on high alert following two confirmed COVID-19 cases last week. Two new asymptomatic cases were reported Friday.

With economies reeling around the world, it wasn't a year of lavish gifts. Robin Sypniewski of Middlesex County, New Jersey, was furloughed twice from her job serving school lunches and is now on reduced hours as her husband retires next week as a trash collector and her daughter wrestles with student debt.

Sypniewski, 58, bought her daughter pajamas, compared to a diamond bracelet last Christmas. Her husband got a \$20 plaque describing his Polish heritage, compared to a tablet computer last year.

"The bills have to be paid this month and next month. With the reduced hours, it's tough," she said.

In Sao Paulo, Brazil, taxi driver Dennys Abreu, 56, navigated the vast city overnight to cover the \$300 monthly payment on his car, which he bought after losing a construction job. An estimated 14 million Brazilians are jobless.

"All I can do is to work as much as I can, get by and hope this damn virus disappears next year," he said.

Meanwhile, church services shifted online. The Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles celebrated five Masses at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, with attendance capped at 130 people, compared to a pre-pandemic capacity of about 3,000. All were livestreamed.

The Chapel of the Cross in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, had five services but in-person attendance was capped at 25 people, compared to as many 2,000 before the pandemic. A Christmas Eve pageant that is normally performed in person was recorded and shown online.

"I have to remember that Christians have been celebrating Christmas for hundreds of years in all sorts of circumstances," said the Rev. Elizabeth Marie Melchionna, the church rector. "Some of the external appearances are different and yet the essence remains the same. What has not changed is that essential

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longing and celebration for love that is born at Christmas.”

In Paris, members of Notre Dame Cathedral’s choir sang inside the church for the first time since a 2019 fire, wearing hard hats and protective suits against construction conditions.

Grief prevailed among families of more than 1.7 million people worldwide killed by the virus and roughly 80 million infected.

Margarita Reyes, 60, is among four people in her house to get the virus in Calexico, California, near the Mexican border. Her 69-year-old husband died within three weeks, and her 35-year-old daughter has been on an oxygen device for five months. They were too sad to celebrate in any way.

Suzanne Rose of Raleigh, North Carolina, delivered homemade spaghetti to the doorstep of her quarantined daughter, a restaurant manager who was exposed to the virus at work. Her son, a firefighter, was also exposed.

“The air went out of the balloon” without her children at Christmas, she said. A video chat was no substitute for watching movies in the same room with them and her husband.

Border closures and bottlenecks foiled some plans. Thousands of drivers were stranded in their trucks at the English port of Dover, lacking the coronavirus tests that France demands amid rising concern about a new, apparently more contagious, virus variant. The British army and French firefighters were brought in to help speed up the testing and free food was distributed.

With Colombia closing its borders to prevent the virus from spreading, Venezuelan migrants couldn’t go home for the holidays. Yakelin Tamaure, a nurse who left economically-wracked Venezuela two years ago, wanted to visit her mother, who is nursing a broken foot.

“I try to send her money, but it’s not the same as being there,” she said.

But many took restrictions in stride. A pre-pandemic Christmas in Ann Arbor, Michigan, for Kristin Schrader, 53, meant hosting a big dinner with appetizers for her brother who visits from Denver, her parents, who live in town, and friends who drop by. This year, she opted for a socially-distant outing with her husband and 13-year-old daughter to watch a man dressed as Santa Claus canoe down the frigid Huron River with his dog. A low-key fondue dinner was also on the agenda.

“It’s just really hard when you’ve all be sitting in the same house to muster up a lot of excitement for the three of us when we’re just staring at each other for months and months on end,” she said.

The 70 residents at St. Peters, a nursing home in the northern Spanish town of El Astillero, held video chats or 30-minute visits with family, separated by a plexiglass wall.

“This terrible thing has come to us, so we must accept it and deal with it with patience,” said Mercedes Arejula, who met with her mother.

The nursing home allowed only one relative inside. A granddaughter blew kisses from outside.

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Spagat reported from San Diego.

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AP correspondents contributed to this report from around the globe.

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This story has been corrected to show that Suzanne Rose is from Raleigh, North Carolina, not Winston-Salem.

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

## Duke women end basketball season amid virus

By DOUG FEINBERG AP Basketball Writer

The Duke women’s basketball team ended its season Friday amid the coronavirus pandemic.

“The student-athletes on the Duke women’s basketball team have made the difficult decision to conclude their current season due to safety concerns,” said Michael Schoenfeld, Vice President for Public Affairs &



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Government Relations and Chief Communications Officer for Duke University.

"We support their decision, as we have supported the choices made by all student-athletes at Duke during this unprecedented time. Duke will maintain our current schedule of competition in other sports and will continue to observe our rigorous health and safety protocols, which include daily testing for all student-athletes and are based on guidance from leading medical experts."

The men's basketball team planned to keep playing.

The women's basketball team has been on pause since Dec. 16 because of two positive COVID-19 tests and contact tracing within the program's travel party. The Blue Devils (3-1) postponed games against Miami, N.C. State and UNC Wilmington. The team's next scheduled contest was against Louisville on Thursday.

The Blue Devils are the first Power Five team to drop out after starting this season. The Ivy League opted out of playing winter sports in November before the basketball season started. A few other schools also decided not to play.

New coach Kara Lawson, who was hired in July, had said this month: "I don't think we should be playing right now. That's my opinion on it." That came a day after Duke men's coach Mike Krzyzewski questioned why college basketball was being played in the midst of the pandemic.

"I would just like for the safety, the mental and physical health of players and staff to assess where we're at," Duke's Hall of Fame coach said after a loss to Illinois on Dec. 8.

Krzyzewski cited the rise in COVID-19 cases as the basis of his argument.

"People are saying the next six weeks are going to be the worst," Krzyzewski said at the time. "To me, it's already pretty bad. On the other side of it, there are these vaccines that are coming out. By the end of the month, 20 million vaccine shots will be given. By the end of January or in February, another 100 million. Should we not reassess that? See just what would be best?"

The virus has already caused many games to be canceled or postponed in the first month of the season. Countless teams have been on pause because of positive tests in their programs. The NCAA said earlier this month that it planned to play its Tournament in a single geographical area with San Antonio being the top choice.

Follow Doug Feinberg on Twitter at <http://www.twitter.com/dougfeinberg>

## 'Unprecedented' mail volume delays Christmas gifts

By MICHAEL LIEDTKE Associated Press

SAN RAMON, Calif. (AP) — Some who mailed holiday presents weeks early this year found they didn't act early enough as Christmas arrived with their gifts stuck in transit.

The U.S. Postal Service said on its website that it was "experiencing unprecedented volume increases and limited employee availability due to the impacts of COVID-19."

Austin Race of Grand Rapids, Michigan, placed an online order Nov. 30 for a collector's model die-cast of a NASCAR racing car. It hadn't reached his father after the Postal Service passed through his neighborhood Thursday night, even though he was notified Dec. 8 that it was shipped by two-day priority mail.

His gift was in Opa-locka, Florida, the last time he checked the tracking number, about 750 miles (1,200 kilometers) south of where he ordered it in Mooresville, North Carolina. Race, 21, resigned himself to telling his father he will have to wait a little longer for his gift.

"I do understand the situation, but it's still kind of frustrating," he said.

Joanna Goldstein ordered Christmas ornaments online Nov. 17 for her 10-year-old son's soccer coach and her son's friend. She figured it was ample time to arrive from a store about 80 miles (128 kilometers) from her home in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

All appeared well Dec. 11 when she received a notice from the Postal Service that the ornaments had been received in Columbus, Ohio.

But then the package made a journey through distribution centers in Warrendale, Pennsylvania, Grand Rapids, Michigan, and Lansing, Michigan, before apparently getting stuck in Detroit.

On Wednesday, she received another notice that delivery would be later than initially anticipated. Her son was angry but Goldstein is taking it in stride.

"I was frustrated last week thinking, 'C'mon, get here,' but now I am just sort of laughing it off," she said.

She told her son the ornaments will hang on the tree next year and they will have a story to tell about the long journey they took during the pandemic.

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## Trump golfs in Florida as COVID relief hangs in the balance

By JILL COLVIN Associated Press

PALM BEACH, Fla. (AP) — President Donald Trump spent his Christmas golfing in Florida as a government shutdown looms and COVID relief hangs in the balance.

Trump, at his Mar-a-Lago club in Palm Beach for the holidays, had no events on his public schedule after throwing the future of a massive COVID relief and government funding bill into question. Failure to sign the bill, which arrived in Florida on Thursday night, could deny relief checks to millions of Americans on the brink and force a government shutdown in the midst of the pandemic.

The White House declined to share details of the president's schedule. It said only: "During the Holiday season, President Trump will continue to work tirelessly for the American People. His schedule includes many meetings and calls."

Trump's expected golf partner Friday was South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham, a close ally.

Trump's vacation 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.

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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 he 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 most dire stretch of the pandemic.

Trump's decision to attack the bill has been seen, at least in part, as political punishment for what he considers insufficient backing by congressional Republicans of his campaign to overturn the results of the Nov. 3 election with unfounded claims of voter fraud.

"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 Thursday.

"I will NEVER FORGET!" he later added.

Trump for weeks now has refused to accept the results of the election and has been pushing new, increasingly outrageous schemes to try to overturn the results. 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 has provided no credible evidence to support his election claims, which have been refuted by a long list of officials, among them judges, former Attorney General William Barr, Republican governors 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 going through 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 call House lawmakers back to Washington for a vote Monday on Trump's \$2,000 proposal, though it would probably die in the Republican-controlled Senate. They are also considering a vote Monday on a stop-gap measure at least to avert a federal shutdown and keep the government running until Democrat Joe 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.

## **Amid anguish of pandemic, sports offered memorable moments**

By JOHN MARSHALL AP Sports Writer

Sarah Fuller was a goalie on the Vanderbilt women's soccer team when a chance at history tapped her on the shoulder.

The Commodores football team was down a kicker because of COVID-19 issues, so coach Derek Mason reached out to soccer coach Darren Ambrose to see if Fuller might be a good option.

Turns out she was.

Fuller, a senior, became the first woman to play in a Power 5 football game with a kickoff against Missouri on Nov. 28. Two weeks later, she made history again as the first to score with two extra points against Tennessee.

Fuller's uniform was sent to the College Football Hall of Fame. Her gender-breaking accomplishment was

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a glimmer of inspiration amid the darkness of a pandemic.

"This whole time has been if I can do it, if I'm good enough to do it," Fuller said. "It wasn't if I was a girl or not. So that's something I've really appreciated. At the end of the day, they treated me like an athlete and that's the best I could ask for."

A pandemic turned the 2020 sports year into one of the strangest, filled with shutdowns, cancellations, infections and quarantines.

But sports can inspire even in the bleakest of times. And 2020, despite all the hardships and heartbreak, was filled with such moments.

The Kansas City Chiefs created one before the shutdowns began, winning their first Super Bowl title in 50 years behind what-will-he-do-next quarterback Patrick Mahomes.

Another long drought ended when Liverpool won the Premier League for its first English championship in 30 years.

The Los Angeles Dodgers kept the trend going at the end of a pandemic-shortened baseball season, earning their first World Series title since 1988.

"We never stopped," World Series MVP Corey Seager said. "We were ready to go as soon as the bell was called and once it did, we kept rolling."

The NHL and NBA stopped then started again in a most pandemic way: in bubbles.

The Tampa Bay Lightning made the most of their two-month stay in Edmonton, winning the franchise's second Stanley Cup (with 2004) by beating the Dallas Stars in six games.

The Los Angeles Lakers started 2020 in mourning after Kobe Bryant, his 13-year-old daughter and six others died in a helicopter crash.

The Lakers honored the former star and Hall of Famer the best way they could, winning the franchise's record-tying 17th championship — the first since Kobe won his fifth in 2009 — by beating the Miami Heat in six games.

"All we wanted was to do it for him," Lakers big man Anthony Davis said. "I know he's looking down on us, proud of us."

Lewis Hamilton made some of his own history in 2020, racing to his seventh Formula One title to match Michael Schumacher's career mark.

Denny Hamlin kicked off the pre-pandemic NASCAR season by becoming the fourth driver to win the Daytona 500 in consecutive years. Popular driver Chase Elliott capped the shortened season by winning his first Cup Series championship, coming from the back of the field to take the checkered flag in seven-time champion Jimmy Johnson's final race.

"To share a moment like that, Jimmie's last race, to win and lock the championship, those are moments you can only dream and this is a dream," said Elliott, who received a big hug from Johnson after his Cup-clinching victory at Phoenix. "Just hoping I don't ever wake up."

While the world was waiting to snap out of a pandemic nightmare, Colin Morikawa hit the kind of shot players around the world fantasize about.

In a battle down the stretch at the PGA Championship, the 23-year-old drove the green on the 294-yard par-4 16th hole at Harding Park, made the eagle putt and went on to shoot a final-round 64 for his first major championship.

"The shot on 16 looked like it was out of a video game," said Cameron Champ, Morikawa's playing partner that August day.

Sophia Popov's run at the Women's Open was like something out of a fairytale.

The German lost 25 pounds because of Lyme disease three years ago and considered giving up her professional career, even working as caddie for a couple of events in 2020. Ranked 304th in the world, she qualified for the Women's Open with a top-10 finish at an LPGA Tour event two weeks earlier and became one of the most unexpected major champions with a sterling four-day run at Royal Troon.

"I almost quit playing last year," she said. "Thank God I didn't."

Kim Ng provided a bit of inspiration when named general manager of the Miami Marlins, the first woman to hold the title in any of the major North American sports.



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And then there was Chris Nikic.

The 21-year-old struggled to breathe, hurt all over and nearly quit multiple times. Nikic pushed through nearly 17 hours of pain in one of the most difficult races in the world, becoming the first person with Down syndrome to complete the Ironman Triathlon.

"You are an Ironman!" the triathlon tweeted after Nikic's accomplishment.

He also gave sports fans an unforgettable moment in a year no one is soon to forget.

## **VIRUS TODAY: Make-or-break in California, Midwest reprieve**

By The Associated Press undefined

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

THREE THINGS TO KNOW TODAY

— California's deadly Christmas was marked by pleas to avoid 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.

— U.S. factories have been cranking out goods during much of the pandemic at rates that are remarkably close to normal. However, manufacturers are concerned they may not be able to keep pace until most of the country is vaccinated because the coronavirus continues to surge in areas where many plants are based.

— As much of the country experiences spiking virus rates, a reprieve from a devastating surge of the coronavirus in the Upper Midwest has given cautious relief to health officials, though they worry that infections remain rampant and holiday gatherings could reignite the worst outbreaks of the pandemic.

THE NUMBERS: The seven-day rolling average for daily new deaths in the U.S. rose over the past two weeks from 2,270.9 on Dec. 10 to 2604.9 on December 24, according to data from Johns Hopkins University.

DEATH TOLL: The U.S. death toll stands at 329,124 people, roughly the same as the population of Riverside, California.

QUOTABLE: "The cozy comfort business continues to thrive because we've now worn slippers every day" since the pandemic hit, said Marshall Cohen, chief retail analyst at the NPD Group.

ICYMI: 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.

ON THE HORIZON: President Trump's refusal of the \$900 billion COVID-19 relief package, which is linked to a \$1.4 trillion government funds bill, could spark a federal shutdown at midnight Monday. Trump is in Florida, where the president has been spending the holidays golfing and tweeting.

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

## **4 pregnant women among 20 migrants dead in Tunisia sinking**

TUNIS, Tunisia (AP) — Four pregnant women were among 20 migrants whose bodies were found off Tunisia's coast after their smuggling boat sank, Tunisian authorities said Friday, as search efforts continued for 13 others believed missing.

Nineteen of the 20 migrants who died in Thursday's sinking were women, according to Mourad Torki, the court spokesman for the Sfax region in central Tunisia.

Coast guard officials and local fishermen retrieved the bodies and brought them to shore, and transferred them in white body bags to a nearby hospital where autopsies were carried out.

Four migrants were rescued, Torki said: One remained under medical supervision Friday and another fled the hospital.

The boat, overloaded and in poor condition, was carrying 37 people — three Tunisians and others from sub-Saharan Africa, Torki said. Coast guard boats and navy divers were searching for the 13 missing, but found no new bodies or survivors Friday, amid strong winds and high waves in the area.

Tunisian authorities say they have intercepted several migrant smuggling boats recently, but that the num-

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ber of attempts has been growing, notably between the Sfax region and the Italian island of Lampedusa. Migrant smuggling boats frequently leave from the coast of Tunisia and neighboring Libya carrying people from across Africa, including a growing number of Tunisians fleeing prolonged economic difficulties in their country.

## Sculpture honors 1st Black president of an American college

LISA RATHKE undefined

RUTLAND, Vt. (AP) — The first Black president of an American college is being honored with a sculpture installed in the Vermont city where he was born in 1826.

The larger-than-life marble bust of Martin Henry Freeman, a scholar, sits on a stack of books in a downtown square as part of the Rutland Sculpture Trail.

"It's a very soft, gentle portrayal of Martin Freeman," said Al Wakefield, one of the sponsors of the piece that was installed in November. "I don't know how many people remember either through historical writings what kind of person he was, but he's depicted as a very gentle, kind, literary, artsy kind of a guy."

It's the eighth sculpture to be added to the city's sculpture trail aimed at celebrating local history and drawing more people to visit the working-class community. Among the pieces is a marble relief honoring the Vermont volunteers who served in the 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment, made up of African Americans soldiers, during the Civil War.

In 1856, Freeman became president of the all-Black Allegheny Institute and Mission Church in the Pittsburgh area, later named Avery College. He attended Middlebury College in Vermont, graduating at the top of his class in 1849. Freeman's father fought in the American Revolution, one way for enslaved men to win their freedom.

The sculptures of Freeman and the Black Civil War soldiers were recently added to the Vermont African American Heritage Trail, a guide to various spots around the state that highlights the lives of African Americans in Vermont.

From the start, organizers of the sculpture trail wanted to be inclusive of all kinds of history, events and people, said Steve Costello, who came up with the idea for the trail.

"The country is full of sculptures planned without much consideration of the contributions of women or minorities, so we developed a broad list of ideas, which included Freeman from the get-go," he said by email.

The very white and liberal state of Vermont has struggled with issues of race. Two years ago, the state's only Black female lawmaker at the time resigned from the Legislature after receiving racist threats. At the end of this year, the head of the Rutland chapter of the NAACP is stepping down after she said she and her family had been targeted by racially motivated harassment. This fall, in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police and the wounding of Jacob Blake in Kenosha, Wisconsin, protesters camped out for more than a month in a park across the street from the Burlington Police Department and held marches calling for the firing of three police officers. The officers are accused in lawsuits of using excessive force against two Black men in separate incidents in 2018.

The Freeman sculpture, designed by Mark Burnett, who is Black, and carved by Don Ramey, was installed at a time when some cities are reconsidering and even removing sculptures or monuments related to the Confederacy or to other historical figures, such as Columbus.

Just this week, Virginia removed a statue of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee that has represented the state in the U.S. Capitol for 111 years. A state commission has recommended replacing it with a statue of Barbara Johns, who protested conditions at her all-Black high school in 1951. Her court case became part of the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision by the U.S. Supreme Court striking down racial segregation in public schools.

Wakefield, a Black man who moved to Vermont from New York City 30 years ago and whose family helped sponsor the sculpture of Freeman, said it was "really, really relevant," in the context of the nationwide protests for racial justice and the reassessment of public statues.

Freeman's academic success took hold at Middlebury College, where he was the only Black student in

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a state that was the first to abolish adult slavery in 1777. Abolitionists in town had urged Middlebury to enroll Black students as a demonstration that the school really stood against slavery, said William Hart, an emeritus professor of history of Black studies at Middlebury College.

Freeman went on to teach mathematics and natural philosophy at Allegheny Institute and Mission Church in the Pittsburgh area, where he became president in 1856. He supported the colonization of Liberia for Black Americans and abruptly resigned in 1863 with a plan to teach at Liberia College.

He went to Liberia, as he often said, to be a man, which he felt he could not be in the United States, Hart said. It was an act of self-determination, he said. But unlike Freeman, many of the Black Americans who went to Liberia were biracial, the sons and daughters of former enslavers, Hart said. Being dark-skinned, Freeman felt discrimination there, too.

He taught at Liberia College and subsequently also became its president. He died in Monrovia in 1889.

"I think that what is important for Vermonters to know is that there has always been a place for persons of African descent in the state of Vermont," said Curtiss Reed, executive director of the Vermont Partnership for Fairness & Diversity. He would like to see more public works of art like the sculpture of Freeman.

"There are those who would say that we can deny the existence of folks of color as well as their contributions, whether as pastors, or as legislators, or as business people, as abolitionists, as veterans," he said. "There's a lot of education to be done."

## 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 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

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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.

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Angela Charlton in Paris contributed to this report.

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

## US plants hope to maintain production despite virus threat

By JOSH FUNK and TOM KRISHER Associated Press

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — U.S. factories have been cranking out goods during much of the pandemic at rates that are remarkably close to normal. However, manufacturers are concerned they may not be able to keep pace until most of the country is vaccinated because the coronavirus continues to surge in areas where many plants are based.

Safeguards that were put in place after the initial wave of the virus appear to have prevented the large outbreaks that sickened hundreds of workers and forced automakers, meat processors and other businesses to halt production last spring. But with the nation's COVID-19 death toll eclipsing 300,000 and the virus spiking in communities that surround the plants, industry and union officials say it may be impossible to keep the virus out of factories.

"We are seeing an increase in the number of positive (test) rates like you're seeing in the surrounding communities," said Gary Johnson, chief manufacturing officer at Ford Motor Co., which has about 56,000 hourly factory workers nationwide.

Federal Reserve statistics show that U.S. industrial output is about 5% below levels in February, before the pandemic hit. It fell by 16.5% between February and April but has rebounded since, led by auto manufacturing.

Beef and pork production have both been running just below last year's levels, Iowa State University agricultural economist Lee Schulz said.

But as it will be months before many people will be able to get vaccinated, factories will remain vulnerable.



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"Even though we are doing OK now, this virus can spread rapidly in areas," said Mark Lauritsen, director of the food processing and meatpacking division for the United Food and Commercial Workers International union. "I worry every day that this virus will explode in one of our plants again, even with all the precautions that we've taken."

At auto plants and factories in other industries where the United Auto Workers union represents workers, cases have risen slightly since around Halloween, but nearly all have been traced to outside of the plants, said UAW President Rory Gamble.

Since reopening in May after an eight-week shutdown, three workers from Fiat Chrysler factories near Detroit have died from the virus, raising fear among thousands of workers.

Gamble said much of the fear has come from misinformation about workers catching the virus in factories, which is not true.

"They need to have a complete understanding that we're doing everything we can to keep them safe," Gamble said. "Because they have a right to be afraid."

The statistics on the pandemic's impact on the meatpacking industry offer plenty of reason to worry. The UFCW union, which represents roughly 80% of the nation's beef and pork workers and 33% of its poultry workers, estimates that at least 19,800 meatpacking workers have been infected or exposed and 128 have died of COVID-19.

Employees such as Donald Nix, who works at a Tyson Foods pork processing plant in Waterloo, Iowa, agonizes about the virus that sidelined him for 27 days in the spring with a fever, body aches and severe headaches.

Nix, 51, is concerned because co-workers keep getting sick. During the spring, more than 1,000 of the plant's 2,800 workers were infected and at least six died. "My workplace is still high risk. My job is still high risk," he said.

But the giants of the meat industry — Tyson Foods, Smithfield Foods, JBS and Cargill — contend that the safety measures that were put in place after the major outbreaks last spring have enabled them to limit the spread of the virus.

"We made substantial investments in personal protective equipment, social distancing safeguards, and other increased health and safety measures across our business. We've seen a dramatic reduction in active cases involving our team members since last spring," Tyson CEO Dean Banks recently told investors.

Measures include wellness questionnaires before work, temperature checks, plastic screens between work stations, increased cleaning of the plants, random testing, and the required use of masks and other protective equipment. The industry spent roughly \$2.5 billion on those improvements and additional pay for workers in the first six months, said Will Sawyer, a protein economist at Cobank, an agribusiness bank.

At Ford, factories are operating at about 98% of their pre-pandemic production. Most workers who have symptoms or have been exposed to the virus stay home until the danger of infecting others has passed, limiting its spread in the plants, Johnson said. The automaker hires temporary workers to take their place, allowing it to keep assembly lines running.

Auto and meatpacking companies say generally less than 1% of their workforces are catching the virus. Automakers and the UAW are urging workers to wear masks in public outside the plants.

Members of the UAW, which represents 150,000 workers employed by General Motors, Ford and Fiat Chrysler, said the companies largely have stuck to their precautions and protocols.

"I know of people who have had it and tested positive, but as far as I know, they're doing what they're supposed to as far as quarantining and getting people tested," said Andrea Repasky a forklift operator at GM's pickup truck factory in Fort Wayne, Indiana.

People she passes at the plant always wear protective gear correctly, she said. Management posts how many people test positive on each shift, and the numbers have been relatively small, even with a minor surge after Thanksgiving, she said.

Ford, General Motors, Toyota and others are starting to see minor problems with smaller parts companies having to shut down factories due to virus outbreaks or government restrictions, especially in Mexico. Ford's

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Johnson said a truck driver shortage is affecting parts deliveries. The company has lined up just-in-time freight to get parts to keep plants running, he said.

Ford had to delay production of its new Bronco SUV from spring until summer because of virus-related parts shortages that the company wouldn't specify.

Toyota said it has come close to halting assembly lines due to a lack of parts, but so far has managed to avoid it.

"There have been a few close calls for sure," said spokesman Scott Vazin. "Any given day, we've got up to 10 parts we're closely monitoring on red alert."

The UFCW's Lauritsen said he hopes the industry will continue working hard to limit the spread of the virus.

"We can't get complacent just because things seem to be holding right now," Lauritsen said. "We know that plants of any kind — anytime people get together in large groups — can act as a super spreader with this virus."

Krisher reported from Detroit.

Follow Josh Funk and Tom Krisher on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/funkwrite> and <https://twitter.com/tkrisher>.

## **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

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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>

## 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.

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>

## Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Saturday, Dec. 26, the 361st day of 2020. There are five days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 26, 2004, more than 230,000 people, mostly in southern Asia, were killed by a 100-foot-high

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tsunami triggered by a 9.1-magnitude earthquake beneath the Indian Ocean.

On this date:

In 1776, British forces suffered a major defeat in the Battle of Trenton during the Revolutionary War.

In 1799, former President George Washington was eulogized by Col. Henry Lee as "first in war, first in peace and first in the hearts of his countrymen."

In 1908, Jack Johnson became the first African-American boxer to win the world heavyweight championship as he defeated Canadian Tommy Burns in Sydney, Australia.

In 1910, the London Palladium, Britain's famous variety theater, first opened.

In 1917, during World War I, President Woodrow Wilson issued a proclamation authorizing the government to take over operation of the nation's railroads.

In 1941, during World War II, Winston Churchill became the first British prime minister to address a joint meeting of the U.S. Congress.

In 1980, Iranian television footage was broadcast in the United States, showing a dozen of the American hostages sending messages to their families.

In 1985, Ford Motor Company began selling its Taurus and Sable sedans and station wagons.

In 1994, French commandos stormed a hijacked Air France jetliner on the ground in Marseille, killing four Algerian hijackers and freeing 170 hostages.

In 1996, six-year-old beauty queen JonBenet Ramsey was found beaten and strangled in the basement of her family's home in Boulder, Colorado. (To date, the slaying remains unsolved.)

In 2003, an earthquake struck the historic Iranian city of Bam, killing at least 26,000 people. Three snowboarders were killed in an avalanche in Provo Canyon, Utah.

In 2006, former President Gerald R. Ford died in Rancho Mirage, California, at age 93.

Ten years ago: A powerful East Coast blizzard stranded thousands of travelers and dumped more than a foot of snow in some areas. Salvador Jorge Blanco, 84, a former president of the Dominican Republic, died in Santo Domingo. Soul singer-songwriter Teena Marie, 54, died in Pasadena, California.

Five years ago: A new onslaught of tornadoes began erupting in the South; twisters ended up hitting parts of Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi. Chicago police killed 19-year-old Quintonio LeGrier, a college student who an officer said was coming at him with a bat, and 55-year-old Bettie Jones, a neighbor who police said was shot accidentally. Basketball player Stephen Curry was named The Associated Press 2015 Male Athlete of the Year.

One year ago: Tony Award-winning composer Jerry Herman, who wrote the music and lyrics for such classic shows as "Mame," "Hello, Dolly!" and "La Cage aux Folles," died in Miami at the age of 88. A winter storm brought downpours and extensive snowfall to parts of Southern California, triggering a tornado and snarling post-Christmas travel. The pilot and six passengers died when a tour helicopter crashed on the top of a mountain on the island of Kauai. Gymnast Simone Biles was named the Associated Press Female Athlete of the Year.

Today's Birthdays: Rhythm-and-blues singer Abdul "Duke" Fakir (The Four Tops) is 85. Record producer (and convicted murderer) Phil Spector is 81. "America's Most Wanted" host John Walsh is 75. Country musician Bob Carpenter (The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band) is 74. Funk musician George Porter Jr. (The Meters) is 73. Baseball Hall of Fame catcher Carlton Fisk is 73. Retired MLB All-Star Chris Chambliss is 72. Baseball Hall of Famer Ozzie Smith is 66. Former Sen. Evan Bayh, D-Ind., is 65. Humorist David Sedaris is 64. Rock musician James Kottak (The Scorpions) is 58. Rock musician Lars Ulrich (Metallica) is 57. Actor Nadia Dajani is 55. Rock musician J is 53. Country singer Audrey Wiggins is 53. Rock singer James Mercer (The Shins; Flake) is 50. Actor-singer Jared Leto is 49. Actor Kendra C. Johnson is 44. Rock singer Chris Daughtry is 41. Actor Beth Behrs is 35. Actor Kit Harington is 34. Actor Eden Sher is 29. Pop singer Jade Thirlwall (Little Mix) is 28. Actor Zach Mills is 25.