

# Groton Daily Independent

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## UpComing Events

**Wed-Fri., Nov. 24-26:** No School - Thanksgiving Vacation

### Tuesday, Nov. 30

Groton Novice Debate  
JH GBB hosting Clark/Willow Lake (7th at 6 p.m. with 8th to follow)

### Wednesday, Dec. 1

8:30 a.m. to Noon: ACT Practice Test

### Thursday, Dec. 2

LifeTouch Pictures Retake at Elementary, 8 a.m. to 11 a.m.

8:30 a.m. to Noon: ACT Practice Test

JH GBB at Northwestern (7th at 6:30 p.m. followed by 8th)



### Friday, Dec. 3

State Oral Interp at Huron  
8:30 a.m. to Noon: ACT Practice Test

### Saturday, Dec. 4

State Oral Interp at Huron  
10 a.m.: JH GBB Jamboree in Groton  
10 a.m.: Wrestling Invite at Clark-Willow Lake

### Monday, Dec. 6

4 p.m.: School Board planning/work session  
JH GBB hosts Langford. 7th at 6 p.m. with 8th to follow

### Tuesday, Dec. 7

GBB at Flandreau Indian. JV at 5 p.m. with varsity to follow  
JHGBB at Tiospa Zina (7th at 4 p.m. with 8th to follow)

### Thursday, Dec. 9

7 p.m.: MS/HS Christmas Concert

### Friday, Dec. 10

GBB hosts Britton-Hecla. JV at 6 p.m. with Varsity to follow

**Groton Daily Independent**  
**PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445**  
**Paul's Cell/Text: 605-397-7460**

## **OPEN:** Recycling Trailer in Groton

The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.  
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## Groton Legion Post has annual fundraiser

The Groton American Legion Post #39 recently held its annual fundraiser. The event was not held last year due to the COVID-19 break-out, but this year, ticket sales went through the roof not in in Groton, but in other surrounding town fundraisers as well. Pictured in the top left is Delbert Hinkelman who did the calling on the Paddle Wheel. In the top right are Bruce Babcock and Robert Wegner overseeing a children's game. (Photos courtesy Bruce Babcock)

## Groton Prairie Mixed

**Nov. 24 Team Standings:** Shih Tzus 9, Coyotes 9, Chipmunks 9, Cheetahs 9, Foxes 7, Jackelopes 5

**Men's High Games:** Roger Spanier 227, 202, Ron Belden 199, Randy Stanley 196

**Women's High Games:** Sue Stanley 188, 170, Nicole Kassube 187, 168, Lori Giedt 166

**Men's High Series:** Roger Spanier 618, Brad Larson 522, Lance Frohling 509

**Women's High Series:** Nicole Kassube 497, Sue Stanley 495, Darci Spanier 458

## Conde National League

**Nov. 22 Team Standings:** Mets 29, Cubs 24, Tigers 23, Pirates 21, Braves 19, Giants 16

**Men's High Series:** Ryan Bethke 223, 217; Tony Waage 189; Russ Bethke 184

**Men's High Games:** Ryan Bethke 617, Tony Waage 484, Butch Farmen 476

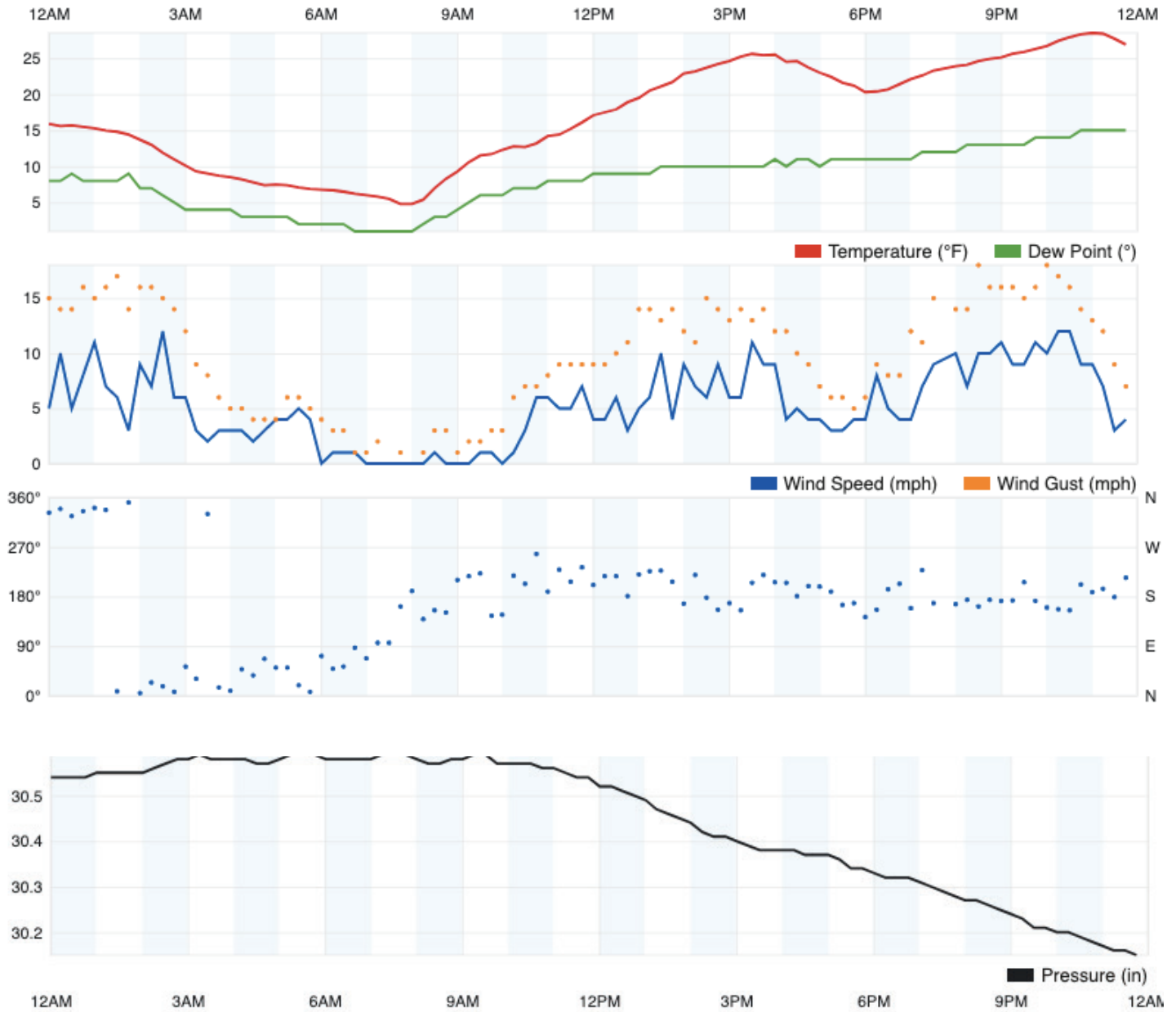
**Women's High Games:** Vickie Kramp 169, 161; Deb Fredrickson 149; Joyce Walter 146

**Women's High Series:** Vickie Kramp 478, Joyce Walter 420, Sam Bahr 406

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs





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Today



Mostly Sunny

High: 50 °F

Tonight



Mostly Cloudy

Low: 30 °F

Saturday



Sunny and  
Breezy

High: 45 °F

Saturday  
Night



Partly Cloudy

Low: 21 °F

Sunday



Partly Sunny

High: 42 °F

Black Friday Warm Weather deals

Warm Today

41 to 61°  
warmest over  
central SD

Breezy Saturday 40s

National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

Temperatures will jump into the 50s today across much of the area, with 40s east of the James River. This will be thanks to a warm front that will move across the area, before slowing down over far north-eastern South Dakota. A cold front will sink south early Saturday morning, with slightly cooler, and breezy winds out of the north to northwest during the day.

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## Today in Weather History

November 26, 1989: Snow began falling in western South Dakota during the early evening of the 26th and swept across the state and into west central Minnesota that night and through much of the 27th. Almost two feet of snow fell in parts of the Black Hills, while one to two inches fell in the southeast part of South Dakota. Icy roads caused by rain that preceded the snow in central and eastern parts of the state combined with strong northerly winds on the 27th to make for dangerous traveling conditions. Numerous accidents were reported, and many cars went into ditches. Some of the heavier snow amount in central, north central, and northeast South Dakota were reported at Leola with 6 inches; Mellette and Onida with 5 inches; and Eureka, Faulkton, and Aberdeen with 4 inches.

November 26, 2001: Heavy snow of 6 to 12 inches, along with strong north winds of 20 to 40 mph, caused near-blizzard conditions and challenging travel conditions across most of central and northeast South Dakota and west central Minnesota. Snowfall amounts were 6 to 12 inches in South Dakota and 10 to 14 inches in west central Minnesota. Most schools were closed or started late on both the 26th and 27th and some businesses were also closed. Many flights were also delayed or canceled. Some snowfall amounts included 6 inches at Eagle Butte, Fort Thompson and Webster; 7 inches at Eureka, Onida, Doland, and Watertown; 8 inches at Highmore, Miller, Onaka, Castlewood, and Selby; 9 inches at Sisseton and Peever; 10 inches at Ortonville, Faulkton, Blunt, Murdo, Kennebec, and Stephan; 11 inches at Victor and Gettysburg; 12 inches at Milbank, White Rock, and Clear Lake; 13 inches at Wheaton; and 14 inches at Browns Valley.

1888 - A late season hurricane brushed the East Coast with heavy rain and gale force winds. The hurricane passed inside Nantucket and over Cape Cod, then crossed Nova Scotia. (David Ludlum)

1896 - Snow and high winds hit the Northern Plains and the Upper Mississippi Valley, with a Thanksgiving Day blizzard across North Dakota. The storm was followed by a severe cold wave in the Upper Midwest. The temperature at Pokegama Dam MI plunged to 45 degrees below zero. (David Ludlum)

1987 - A Thanksgiving Day storm in the northeastern U.S. produced heavy snow in northern New England and upstate New York. Snowfall totals in Maine ranged up to twenty inches at Flagstaff Lake. Totals in New Hampshire ranged up to 18 inches at Errol. Gales lashed the coast of Maine and New Hampshire. A second storm, over the Southern and Central Rockies, produced nine inches of snow at Kanosh UT, and 13 inches at Divide CO, with five inches reported at Denver CO. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Thunderstorms produced severe weather over the Central Gulf Coast States during the late morning and afternoon hours. Five tornadoes were reported in Mississippi, with the tornadoes causing a million dollars damage at Ruleville, and in Warren County. In Utah, the town of Alta was blanketed with 15 inches of snow overnight, and during the day was buried under another 16.5 inches of snow. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - A massive storm over the western U.S. produced heavy snow in Utah, Colorado, Wyoming and Montana. The storm produced more than two feet of snow in the higher elevations of northern and central Utah, bringing more than sixty inches of snow to the Alta Ski Resort in the Wasatch Mountains. Winds in Utah gusted to 60 mph at Bullfrog. The storm brought much needed snow to the ski resorts of Colorado, with 19 inches reported at Beaver Creek. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

November 26, 2007: Lightning and heavy rain delay the start of the Monday Night Football game at Pittsburgh's Heinz Field between the Miami Dolphins and the Pittsburgh Steelers by 25 minutes. The muddy field conditions contribute to one of the lowest scoring NFL games won by the Steelers, 3-0. The teams combined 375 yards, and the winning field goal occurred with 17 seconds left in the game.



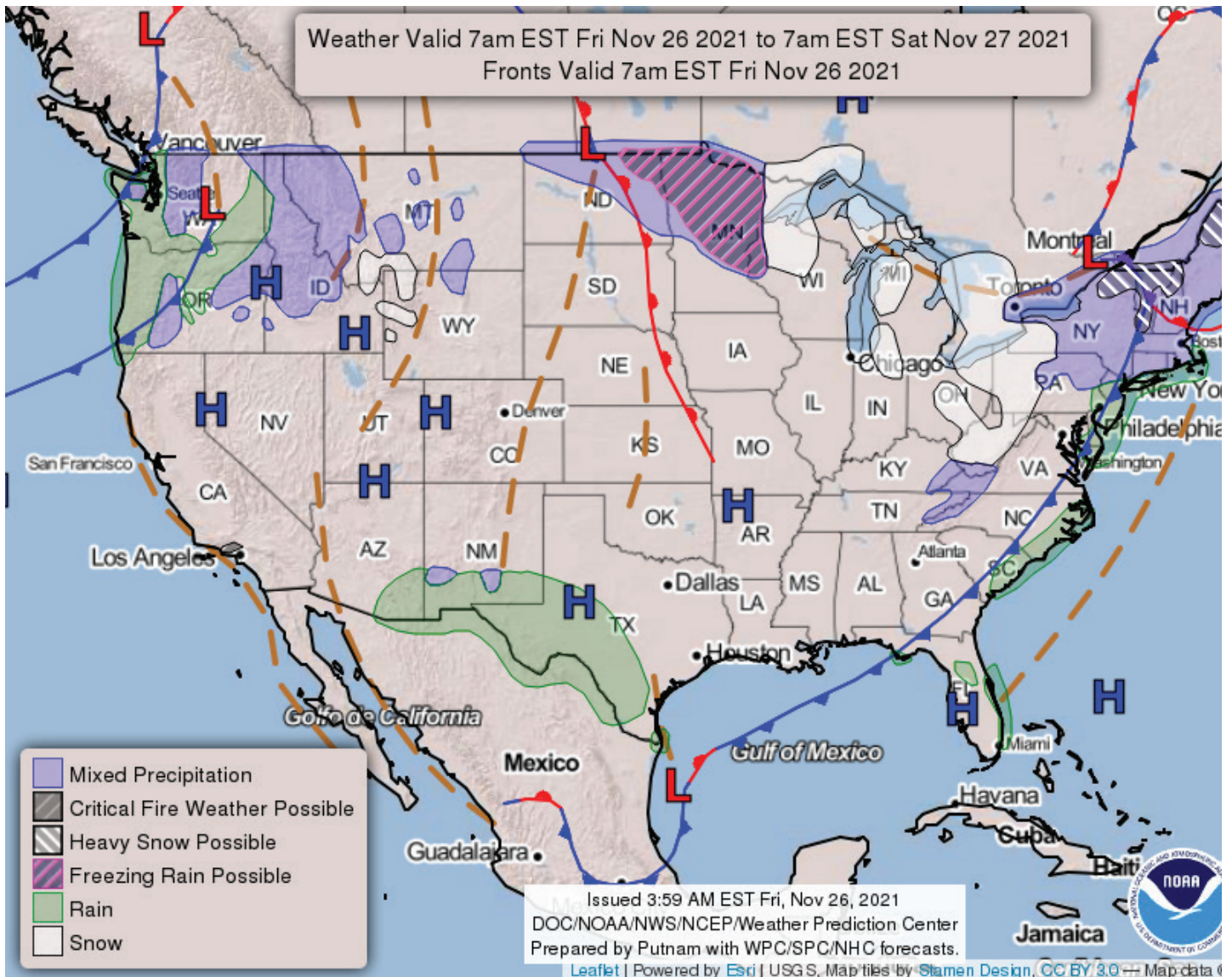
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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

**High Temp: 28.5 °F at 11:00 PM**  
**Low Temp: 4.8 °F at 7:45 AM**  
**Wind: 18 mph at 10:00 PM**  
**Precip: 0.00**

**Record High: 63° in 1914**  
**Record Low: -24° in 1996**  
**Average High: 37°F**  
**Average Low: 15°F**  
**Average Precip in Nov.: 0.66**  
**Precip to date in Nov.: 0.16**  
**Average Precip to date: 21.13**  
**Precip Year to Date: 19.88**  
**Sunset Tonight: 4:54:55 PM**  
**Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:45:59 AM**



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## OUR GOD IS A GOOD GOD!

Mary Jo spent part of her spring vacation with her Grandmother. When she returned home, her mother asked, "Were you a good girl?"

"Mom, I was so good that I could hardly stand it," she replied. "It's a wonder I had any fun I was so good."

The word "good" is difficult to measure. There is no "good-er" or "good-est." Why? Because the word good is only applicable to God. And we must never forget that it is not possible for God to improve on anything He does or do anything any "good-er."

On one occasion when Jesus was starting on a trip, a man came running up to Him and asked, "Good Teacher, what must I do to get into heaven?"

"Why do you call me good?" Jesus asked. "Only God is truly good!"

His reply did not disclaim that He, too, was good. On the contrary! He claimed and proclaimed His goodness when He confessed that He was God!

Unfortunately, the young man regarded Jesus as a human teacher only. For him to attach the word "good" to a mere human being was a bad thing. So, it was necessary for him to understand that only God is good and that no one other than God is, in fact, good. Jesus is good because He is God.

Whenever we think of ourselves, we must always remember who we are, how we think, and that we are human. When we think of God, however, we must shout with the Psalmist, "Give thanks to God for He is good!"

Prayer: Thank you, Father, that You are good and, in that goodness, we see Your love, grace, and salvation. When we look at You, we see Your goodness and our need. Help us to be more like you. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever. Psalm 107:1

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## 2021 Community Events

- Cancelled** Legion Post #39 Spring Fundraiser (Sunday closest to St. Patrick's Day, every other year)  
03/27/2021 Lions Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter Weekend)  
04/10/2021 Dueling Pianos Baseball Fundraiser at the American Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm  
04/24/2021 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)  
04/25/2021 Princess Prom (Sunday after GHS Prom)  
05/01/2021 Lions Club Spring City-Wide Rummage Sales 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)  
05/31/2021 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)  
6/7-9/2021 St. John's Lutheran Church VBS  
06/17/2021 Groton Transit Fundraiser, 4-7 p.m.  
06/18/2021 SDSU Alumni & Friends Golf Tournament at Olive Grove  
06/19/2021 U8 Baseball Tournament  
06/19/2021 **Postponed to Aug. 28th:** Lions Crazy Golf Fest at Olive Grove Golf Course, Noon  
06/26/2021 U10 Baseball Tournament  
06/27/2021 U12 Baseball Tournament  
07/04/2021 Firecracker Golf Tournament at Olive Grove  
07/11/2021 Lions Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 10am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)  
07/22/2021 Pro-Am Golf Tournament at Olive Grove Golf Course  
07/30/2021-08/03/2021 State "B" American Legion Baseball Tournament in Groton  
08/06/2021 Wine on Nine at Olive Grove Golf Course  
08/13/2021 Groton Basketball Golf Tournament  
**Cancelled** Lions Club Crazy Golf Fest 9am Olive Grove Golf Course  
08/29/2021 Groton Firemen Summer Splash Day at GHS Parking Lot (4-5 p.m.)  
09/11/2021 Lions Club Fall City-Wide Rummage Sales 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)  
09/12/2021 Sunflower Classic Golf Tournament at Olive Grove  
09/18-19 Groton Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport  
10/08/2021 Lake Region Marching Band Festival (2nd Friday in October)  
10/09/2021 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm (Saturday before Columbus Day)  
10/29/2021 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm  
10/29/2021 Groton United Methodist Trunk or Treat (Halloween)  
11/13/2021 Legion Post #39 Turkey Party (Saturday closest to Veteran's Day)  
11/11/2021 Veteran's Day Program at the GHS Arena  
11/21/2021 Groton Area Snow Queen Contest  
11/25/2021 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)  
11/30/2021 James Valley Telecommunications Holiday Open House 10am-4pm  
12/04/2021 Olive Grove Tour of Homes  
12/11/2021 Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9am-Noon



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## The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

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## News from the Associated Press

### Many give thanks to Minnesota for producing the most turkeys

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Production numbers show there's a good chance that a Thanksgiving turkey came from Minnesota, especially if you live in the Midwest.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture says Americans should eat about 46 million turkeys on Thanksgiving. Minnesota farmers generally grow about 45 million turkeys a year on more than 500 farms, or nearly 18% of the country's turkey supply, according to the Minnesota Department of Agriculture.

Minnesota was the nation's leader in turkey production in 2020 with 40 million birds, the USDA said. That was nine million more than North Carolina, which was No. 2 in production.

The price of the birds has steadily increased this year. Demand has gone up after being tamped down by the pandemic last year when fewer families gathered and restaurants were empty.

"USDA is actually predicting this year to be a record high price for turkeys," said Tim Petry, a livestock marketing economist with the North Dakota State University Extension Service. "From a price standpoint, these are the best prices they've seen for a number of years. So you know, that's good news for producers."

Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz earlier this week lauded turkey growers for their work in a billion-dollar industry that employs thousands of people in the state.

"Many our producers are truly family farms, generations of family farms that make a difference," he said.

South Dakota produces about 5 million turkeys a year and North Dakota about 1 million, according to USDA figures.

### Stores kick off Black Friday but pandemic woes linger

By ANNE D'INNOCENZIO The Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Retailers are expected to usher in the unofficial start to the holiday shopping season Friday with bigger crowds than last year in a closer step toward normalcy. But the fallout from the pandemic continues to weigh on businesses and shoppers' minds.

Buoyed by solid hiring, healthy pay gains and substantial savings, customers are returning to stores and splurging on all types of items. But the spike has also resulted in limited selection across the board as suppliers and retailers have been caught flat-footed.

Shortages of shipping containers and truckers have delayed deliveries while inflation continues to creep. The combination of not finding the right item at the right price — in addition to a labor shortage that makes it more difficult for businesses to respond to customers — could make for a less festive mood.

At Macy's Herald Square store in Manhattan, shelves were stocked and shoppers were steadily streaming in at 6:30 am, a half hour after the doors opened.

Aniva Pawlowski got to Macy's just ahead of the 6 a.m. opening with plans to buy shoes and coats. Shopping on Thanksgiving Day had been a family tradition, but she stayed home last year and just shopped online. Worries about shortages drove the New Yorker to shop in person and she plans to spend about \$1,000 on holiday shopping, similar to years past, even though she's concerned about rising costs for gas and food.

"Everything is expensive," she said.

Shoppers are expected to pay on average between 5% to 17% more for toys, clothing, appliances, TVs and others purchases on Black Friday this year compared with last year, according to Aurelien Duthoit, senior sector advisor at Allianz Research, with the biggest price increases on TVs. That's because whatever discounts available will be applied to goods that already cost more.

"I think it is going to be a messy holiday season," said Neil Saunders, managing director at GlobalData Retail. "It will be a bit frustrating for retailers, consumers and the workers. We are going to see long lines. We are going to see messier stores. We are going to see delays as you collect online orders."

Big retailers have been preparing for the holiday season, trying to find workarounds to supply chain

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hold-ups. Some of the biggest U.S. retailers are rerouting goods to less congested ports, even chartering their own vessels.

"We are deep and we are ready," Macy's CEO Jeff Gennette told The Associated Press, noting inventory levels are up 20% compared to last year. "We are in good shape."

While Black Friday has a strong hold on Americans' imaginations as a day of crazed shopping, it has lost stature over the last decade as stores opened on Thanksgiving and shopping shifted to Amazon and other online retailers. Stores diluted the day's importance further by advertising Black Friday sales on more and more days.

The pandemic led many retailers to close stores on Thanksgiving Day and push discounts on their websites, starting as early as October. That's continuing this year, although there are deals in stores as well.

Still, some experts believe Black Friday will again be the busiest shopping day this year.

Crowds at Macy's were higher in the first few hours of their 6 a.m. opening compared with last year, while online sales were strong, CEO Gennette said.

Carol Claridge of Bourne, England, has been coming to New York for Thanksgiving-week shopping for 15 years, but skipped it last year because of the pandemic. The U.S. reopened to travelers from the U.K. earlier in November when it lifted pandemic travel bans.

"We had to wait a long time to do this," said Claridge, who was looking at beauty gift sets on the first floor of Macy's with a friend. "We are picking up anything we see that we like. We call it our annual shopping outing."

U.S. retail sales, excluding auto and gas, from this past Monday through Sunday are expected to increase 10% from last year and 12% from the 2019 holiday season, according to Mastercard SpendingPulse, which measures overall retail sales across all payment types. Sales on Black Friday are expected to surge 20% from a year ago as store traffic comes back.

Online shopping remains huge, and sales online are expected to rise 7% for the week after the massive 46% gain a year ago, when many shoppers stayed home, according to Mastercard. For the overall holiday season, online sales should increase 10% from a year ago, compared with a 33% increase last year, according to Adobe Digital Economy Index.

For the November and December period, the National Retail Federation, the nation's largest retail trade group, predicts that sales will increase between 8.5% and 10.5%. Holiday sales increased about 8% in 2020 when shoppers, locked down during the early part of the pandemic, spent their money on pajamas and home goods.

## **FDA: Merck COVID pill effective, experts will review safety**

By MATTHEW PERRONE AP Health Writer

Federal health regulators say an experimental COVID-19 pill from Merck is effective against the virus, but they will seek input from outside experts on risks of birth defects and other potential problems during pregnancy.

The Food and Drug Administration posted its analysis of the pill ahead of a public meeting next week where academic and other experts will weigh in on its safety and effectiveness. The agency isn't required to follow the group's advice.

The FDA scientists said their review identified several potential risks, including possible toxicity and birth defects. Given those risks the FDA will ask its advisers whether the drug should never be given during pregnancy or whether it could be made available in certain cases.

Under that scenario, the FDA said the drug would carry warnings about risks during pregnancy, but doctors would still have the option to prescribe it in certain cases where its benefits could outweigh its risks for patients.

Given the safety concerns, FDA said Merck agreed the drug would not be used in children.

Additionally, the FDA flagged a concern that Merck's drug led to small changes in the coronavirus' signature spike protein, which it uses to penetrate human cells. Theoretically, FDA cautioned, those changes



could lead to dangerous new variants.

Regulators also noted that Merck collected far less safety data overall on its drug than was gathered for other COVID-19 therapies.

FDA will ask its independent advisers to discuss all those issues and then vote on whether the drug's overall benefits outweigh its risks.

All COVID-19 drugs currently authorized by the FDA require an injection or IV and can only be given by health professionals. If authorized, Merck's drug would be the first that U.S. patients could take at home to ease symptoms and speed recovery. It is already authorized for emergency use in the U.K.

The meeting marks the first time regulators have publicly reviewed a new drug for COVID-19, reflecting the intense interest and scrutiny of a pill that could be soon used by millions of Americans.

The drug, molnupiravir, has been shown to significantly cut the rate of hospitalizations and deaths among people with mild-to-moderate coronavirus infections.

Merck's drug uses a novel approach to fight COVID-19: it inserts tiny mutations into the coronavirus' genetic code to the point that it can't reproduce itself.

But that genetic effect has raised concerns that in rare cases the drug could cause birth defects or tumors.

Pregnant women were excluded from Merck's study. And both women and men in the study were instructed to use contraception or abstain from sex.

For its part, Merck says results from two company studies in rodents show "molnupiravir does not cause mutations or damage to DNA in these animal models." The company said the rodents received higher doses for longer periods of time than humans who will take the drug.

FDA reviewers also confirmed previously reported interim results from Merck that the pill cut the rate of hospitalization and death by about half among patients with early symptoms of COVID-19 who faced increased risk due to health problems.

However, on Friday morning Merck announced updated results from the same study that showed a smaller benefit from the drug.

Among more than 1,400 adults in a company study, molnupiravir reduced the combined risk of hospitalization and death by 30%, less than the 50% initially reported based on incomplete results.

Nearly 7% of patients who received Merck's drug within five days of COVID-19 symptoms ended up in the hospital and one died. That compared to 10% of patients hospitalized who were taking the placebo and nine deaths.

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The Associated Press Health and Science Department receives support from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute's Department of Science Education. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

## **EXPLAINER: What is this new COVID variant in South Africa?**

By MARIA CHENG AP Medical Writer

LONDON (AP) — WHAT IS THIS NEW COVID-19 VARIANT IN SOUTH AFRICA?

South African scientists have identified a new version of the coronavirus this week that they say is behind a recent spike in COVID-19 infections in Gauteng, the country's most populous province. It's unclear where the new variant actually arose, but it was first detected by scientists in South Africa and has also been seen in travelers to Belgium, Botswana, Hong Kong and Israel.

Health Minister Joe Phaahla said the variant was linked to an "exponential rise" of cases in the last few days, although experts are still trying to determine if the new variant, named B.1.1.529, is actually responsible.

From just over 200 new confirmed cases per day in recent weeks, South Africa saw the number of new daily cases rocket to 2,465 on Thursday. Struggling to explain the sudden rise in cases, scientists studied virus samples from the outbreak and discovered the new variant.

On Friday, the World Health Organization was convening a group of experts to assess the data from South Africa.

WHY ARE SCIENTISTS WORRIED ABOUT THIS NEW VARIANT?

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It appears to have a high number of mutations — about 30 — in the coronavirus' spike protein, which could affect how easily it spreads to people.

Sharon Peacock, who has led genetic sequencing of COVID-19 in Britain at the University of Cambridge, said the data so far suggest the new variant has mutations "consistent with enhanced transmissibility," but said that "the significance of many of the mutations is still not known."

Lawrence Young, a virologist at the University of Warwick, described the variant as "the most heavily mutated version of the virus we have seen." He said it was concerning that although the variant was only being detected in low levels in parts of South Africa, "it looks like it's spreading rapidly."

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the U.S.' top infectious diseases doctor, said American officials had arranged a call with their South African counterparts later on Friday to find out more details and said there was no indication the variant had yet arrived in the U.S.

## WHAT'S KNOWN AND NOT KNOWN ABOUT THE VARIANT?

Scientists know that the new variant is genetically distinct from previous variants including the beta and delta variants, but do not know if these genetic changes make it any more transmissible or dangerous.

South African scientists have noticed a surge of cases, but don't know if the new variant is responsible. It will take weeks to sort out if vaccines are still effective against it.

So far, there is no indication the variant causes more severe disease. South African experts said that as with other variants, some infected people don't have any symptoms.

Even though some of the genetic changes in the new variant appear worrying, it's still unclear if the virus will pose a significant public health threat. Some previous variants, like the beta variant, initially concerned scientists but didn't end up spreading very far.

Francois Balloux, director of the Genetics Institute at University College London said it was impossible to make any predictions about whether or not the virus was more dangerous or infectious based on its genetic make-up alone.

## HOW DID THIS NEW VARIANT ARISE?

The coronavirus mutates as it spreads and many new variants, including those with worrying genetic changes, often just die out. Scientists monitor COVID-19 sequences for mutations that could make the disease more transmissible or deadly, but they cannot determine that simply by looking at the virus. They must compare the pattern of disease in outbreaks to the genetic sequences. Determining whether there is an actual connection can take time.

Peacock said the variant "may have evolved in someone who was infected but could then not clear the virus, giving the virus the chance to genetically evolve," in a scenario similar to how experts think the alpha variant — which was first identified in England — also emerged, by mutating in an immune-compromised person.

## ARE THE TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS BEING IMPOSED BY SOME COUNTRIES JUSTIFIED?

Maybe. As of noon Friday, travelers arriving in the U.K. from South Africa, Namibia, Botswana, Lesotho, Eswatini and Zimbabwe will have to self-isolate for 10 days. European Union nations also moved quickly on Friday to try to stop air travel from southern Africa.

Given the recent rapid rise in COVID-19 in South Africa, restricting travel from the region is "prudent," said Neil Ferguson, an infectious diseases expert at Imperial College London.

Balloux of University College London said that if the new variant turns out to be more infectious than delta, the new restrictions will have little impact but that they could still buy the U.K. some time to boost vaccination rates and roll out other possible interventions.

## WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

The World Health Organization has convened a technical group of experts to decide whether the new variant warrants being designated a variant of interest or a variant of concern. If they do, the variant will likely be named after a letter of the Greek alphabet, in line with the current naming system.

Variants of interest — which currently include the mu and lambda variants — have genetic changes known to affect things like transmissibility and disease severity and have been identified to cause signifi-

cant clusters in multiple countries.

Variants of concern — which include alpha, beta and delta — have shown they can spread more easily, cause more serious disease or make current tools like vaccines less effective.

To date, the delta variant remains by far the most transmissible form of COVID; it accounts for more than 99% of sequences shared with the world's biggest public database.

## World takes action as new variant emerges in southern Africa

By RAF CASERT Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — A slew of nations moved to stop air travel from southern Africa on Friday, and stocks plunged in Asia and Europe in reaction to news of a new, potentially more transmissible COVID-19 variant.

"The last thing we need is to bring in a new variant that will cause even more problems," said German Health Minister Jens Spahn, amid a massive spike in cases in the 27-nation European Union, which is recommending a ban on flights from southern African nations.

Within a few days of the discovery of the new variant, it has already impacted on a jittery world that is sensitive to bad COVID-19 news, with deaths around the globe standing at well over 5 million.

Medical experts, including the World Health Organization, warned against any overreaction before all elements were clear but nations who acted said their concerns were justified.

"Early indications show this variant may be more transmissible than the delta variant and current vaccines may be less effective against it," British Health Secretary Sajid Javid told lawmakers. "We must move quickly and at the earliest possible moment," he said.

Belgium became the first European Union country to announce a case of the variant.

"We have one case of this variant that is confirmed. It's someone who came from abroad," said Health Minister Frank Vandenbroucke. "It's a suspicious variant. We don't know if it's a very dangerous variant."

Israel, one of the world's most vaccinated countries, announced Friday that it has also detected the country's first case of the new variant, in a traveler who returned from Malawi. The traveler and two other suspected cases have been placed in isolation. It said all three are vaccinated but that it is currently looking into their exact vaccination status.

The new variant immediately infected stock markets around the world. Major indexes fell in Europe and Asia and Dow Jones futures dipped 800 points ahead of the market opening in the U.S.

"Investors are likely to shoot first and ask questions later until more is known," said Jeffrey Halley of foreign exchange broker Oanda.

Oil prices plunged, with US. crude off 6.7% at \$73.22 per barrel and the international Brent benchmark off 5.6% at \$77.64, both unusually large moves for a single day. The pandemic caused oil prices to plunge during the initial outbreak of the pandemic in 2020 because travel restrictions reduced demand for fuel.

Airlines shares were hammered, with Lufthansa off 12.4%, IAG, parent of British Airways and Iberia, off 14.4%, Air France-KLM down 8.9% and easyJet falling 10.9%

The WHO cautioned not to jump to conclusions too fast.

Speaking before the EU announcement, Dr. Michael Ryan, the head of emergencies at the WHO said that "it's really important that there are no knee-jerk responses."

"We've seen in the past, the minute there's any kind of mention of any kind of variation and everyone is closing borders and restricting travel. It's really important that we remain open, and stay focused," Ryan said.

The Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention agreed and it "strongly discourages the imposition of travel ban for people originating from countries that have reported this variant," it said in a statement. It added that "over the duration of this pandemic, we have observed that imposing bans on travelers from countries where a new variant is reported has not yielded a meaningful outcome."

Those urgings quickly fell on deaf ears.

The U.K. announced that it was banning flights from South Africa and five other southern African countries effective at noon on Friday, and that anyone who had recently arrived from those countries would



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be asked to take a coronavirus test.

Germany said its flight ban could be enacted as soon as Friday night. Spahn said airlines coming back from South Africa will only be able to transport German citizens home, and travelers will need to go into quarantine for 14 days whether they are vaccinated or not.

Germany has seen new record daily case numbers in recent days and passed the mark of 100,000 deaths from COVID-19 on Thursday.

Italy's health ministry also announced measures to ban entry into Italy of anyone who has been in seven southern African nations — South Africa, Lesotho, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Namibia and Eswatini — in the past 14 days due to the new variant. The Netherlands and the Czech Republic are planning similar measures.

The Japanese government announced that from Friday, Japanese nationals traveling from Eswatini, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Botswana, South Africa and Lesotho will have to quarantine at government-dedicated accommodation for 10 days and do a COVID test on Day 3, Day 6 and Day 10. Japan has not yet opened up to foreign nationals.

The actions had a quick effect in the world of sports. A batch of British and Irish golfers withdrew from the Joburg Open before Friday's second round after the U.K. government announced it was banning flights from South Africa.

The South African government said in a statement that the "U.K.'s decision to temporarily ban South Africans from entering the U.K. seems to have been rushed as even the World Health Organization is yet to advise on the next steps."

The coronavirus evolves as it spreads and many new variants, including those with worrying mutations, often just die out. Scientists monitor for possible changes that could be more transmissible or deadly, but sorting out whether new variants will have a public health impact can take time.

Currently identified as B.1.1.529, the new variant has also been found in Botswana and Hong Kong in travelers from South Africa, he said.

The WHO's technical working group is to meet Friday to assess the new variant and may decide whether to give it a name from the Greek alphabet. It says coronavirus infections jumped 11% in Europe in the past week, the only region in the world where COVID-19 continues to rise. The WHO's Europe director, Dr. Hans Kluge, warned that without urgent measures, the continent could see another 700,000 deaths by the spring.

Lorne Cook in Brussels, Colleen Barry in Milan, Pan Pylas in London, Jamey Keaten in Geneva, Mike Corder in The Hague, Dave McHugh in Frankfurt, Carley Petesch in Dakar, Andrew Meldrum in Johannesburg and Frank Jordans in Berlin contributed

## Survivor found in coal mine accident in Russia's Siberia

By DASHA LITVINOVA Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Rescue crews have found a survivor in a Siberian coal mine where dozens of miners are presumed dead after a devastating methane explosion, a senior regional official said on Friday.

Kemerovo region Governor Sergei Tsivilyov said on the messaging app Telegram that the survivor was found in the Listvyazhnaya mine in southwestern Siberia, and "he is being taken to the hospital."

Acting Emergency Minister Alexander Chupriyan identified the survivor as rescuer Alexander Zakovryashin who had been presumed dead. "I can consider it a miracle," Chupriyan said.

Zakovryashin was conscious when rescuers reached him and has been hospitalized with moderate carbon monoxide poisoning, according to emergency officials.

Authorities on Thursday confirmed 14 fatalities — 11 miners and three rescuers who perished while searching for others trapped in a remote section of the mine. Six more bodies were recovered on Friday morning, while 31 people remain missing. Authorities now put the presumed death toll to 51.

Gov. Tsivilyov said finding other survivors at this point was highly unlikely.

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Rescuers were forced to halt their search for survivors following Thursday's methane gas explosion and fire because of a buildup of methane and carbon monoxide gas. A total 239 people were rescued from the mine; 63 of them so far have sought medical treatment, according to Kemerovo officials.

It appears to be the deadliest mine accident in Russia since 2010, when two methane explosions and a fire killed 91 people at the Rospadskaya mine in the same Kemerovo region.

In 2016, 36 miners were killed in a series of methane explosions in a coal mine in Russia's far north. In the wake of the incident, authorities analyzed the safety of the country's 58 coal mines and declared 20 of them potentially unsafe. Media reports say the Listvyazhnaya mine wasn't among them, however in 2004 a methane explosion in the mine killed 13 people.

Russia's top independent news site, Meduza, reported that this year authorities suspended the work of certain sections of the mine nine times and fined the mine more than 4 million rubles (roughly \$53,000) for safety violations.

Law enforcement officials also said Friday that miners had complained about the high level of methane in the mine.

Regional officials have declared three days of mourning while Russia's Investigative Committee has launched a criminal probe into potential safety violations. The director of the mine and two senior managers were detained.

A separate criminal probe was launched Friday into allegations that state officials who inspected the mine earlier this month were negligent.

## Protesters break into Lebanese ministry as crisis deepens

BEIRUT (AP) — A small group of protesters broke into a ministry building in Beirut early on Friday and removed a photo of the president from one of its main rooms, as the Lebanese pound hit a new low amid a worsening economic and political stalemate.

The protesters who entered the Ministry of Social Affairs said conditions in crisis-hit Lebanon have become unbearable as a result of the rapid economic collapse and ongoing crash of the pound, which reached 25,100 to the dollar. The previous record was 25,000.

Prices have been skyrocketing in recent weeks as the government lifted subsidies on fuel and some medicines, making them out of reach for many in Lebanon. Some three quarters of the population of 6 million, including a million Syrian refugees, now live in poverty. The minimum monthly wage is now worth about \$27.

Protesters have blamed the ministry for sluggishness in issuing ration cards that are supposed to give poor families monthly financial aid.

The protesters broke into the meeting room at the ministry and turned a framed picture of President Michel Aoun upside down before removing it. They replaced it with a banner in Arabic that read "revolutionaries of October 17."

The protesters were referring to the start of nationwide protests in October 2019 against the country's ruling class. They are blamed for decades of corruption and mismanagement that threw the small nation into the worst economic and financial crisis in its modern history.

"Those who usurped public money cannot conduct reforms," shouted one of the protesters before leaving the building following police intervention. "We have hit rock bottom. Things cannot get worse."

The crisis has been made worse by the coronavirus and the August 2020 explosion in Beirut's port that killed 216 people, injured more than 6,000 and destroyed parts of the capital.

The Cabinet, formed in September after a 13-month vacuum, has not met in more than six weeks amid deep divisions between rival groups over the judge leading the investigation into the port blast. Comments by a government minister that triggered a diplomatic row with oil-rich Gulf Arab nations have added to the acrimony.

In other parts of the country, protesters placed posters that read "the mafia that destroyed the Lebanese pound" outside some branches of local banks, the state-run National News Agency said.

For the past two years, local lenders have imposed informal capital controls that prevent many people from accessing their savings.

## France lashes out at Britain's latest proposal on migrants

By DANICA KIRKA, JOHN LEICESTER and PAN PYLAS Associated Press

CALAIS, France (AP) — France reacted with anger and dismay on Friday to Britain's latest proposals for dealing with the deadly flow of migrants between their shores, ramping up a battle of wills over dangerous crossings of the English Channel that killed 27 people in a sinking this week.

President Emmanuel Macron scolded the office of Prime Minister Boris Johnson for making public a letter that the British leader sent to the French leader on Thursday. Most notably, Johnson proposed that France take back migrants who illegally cross the English Channel — an idea that France quickly and summarily dismissed.

"I am surprised by methods when they are not serious," Macron said on a visit to Italy. "You don't communicate from a leader to another on these matters via tweets and letters that are made public. We are not whistleblowers."

"Come on, come on," Macron added.

The letter and France's response were the latest crossing of swords in what has become an increasingly fractious relationship between the erstwhile European partners who are struggling to rebuild a working relationship in the wake of Britain's exit from the EU. They're arguing not only about migration but also about their post-Brexit agreements, including regulating fishing in waters where British and French boats both work.

Adding to the climate of tension were blockades that French fishing crews were planning Friday of French ports and traffic under the English Channel to disrupt the flow of goods to the U.K and increase pressure on Britain for more post-Brexit fishing licenses.

The spat over Johnson's letter had an immediate, concrete repercussion: Macron's government spokesman said Britain's Home Secretary Priti Patel was no longer welcome at a meeting Sunday of European ministers who'll explore ways to crack down on migrant-smuggling networks.

The spokesman, Gabriel Attal, portrayed Johnson's proposals as duplicitous, saying the letter "doesn't correspond at all" with discussions that Johnson and Macron had Wednesday after the sinking of an inflatable craft laden with migrants, the deadliest migrant tragedy to date in the English Channel.

"We are sick of double-speak," Attal said.

He dismissed the proposal that France take back migrants who cross illegally from French shores to Britain as "clearly not what we need to solve this problem."

Johnson also set out proposals that France has already rejected for British border officials to begin patrols on the beaches of northern France as early as next week. He also recommended joint or reciprocal maritime patrols in each other's territorial waters and airborne surveillance by manned flights and drones.

British Transport Secretary Grant Shapps said Johnson made the proposals in "good faith." He urged France to reconsider the decision to dis-invite Patel to Sunday's ministers' meeting. They are convening in Calais, one of French coastal towns where migrants gravitate to in their attempts to get across the busy stretch of sea separating France and Britain. It was also one of the ports being targeted Friday for blockades by French fishermen.

"I don't think there is anything inflammatory to ask for close co-operation with our nearest neighbours," Shapps told BBC radio. "The proposal was made in good faith. I can assure our French friends of that and I hope that they will reconsider meeting up to discuss it."

Others in Johnson's Conservative Party were less conciliatory.

Tim Loughton, a lawmaker from Johnson's Conservative Party, accused France of being petulant in its response to Johnson's letter.

"The French have got to get real and recognise there are consequences from turning a blind eye rather than stopping the migrant boats at source and those consequences are tragedies like the one 2 days ago,"



he said on Twitter. "Partnership working is the only way to find a solution not petulance."

The deaths of 27 men, women and children in the dangerous waterway have brought to a head long-simmering French-British tensions that have sharpened in recent months.

U.K. officials have criticized France for rejecting their offer of British police and border officers to conduct joint patrols along the channel coast with French police. French authorities accuse Britain of stoking migration by ignoring the use by British employers of clandestine workers who crossed the Channel illegally.

More than 23,000 people have already entered the U.K. on small boats this year, up from 8,500 last year and just 300 in 2018, according to data compiled by the British Parliament.

Leicester reported from Le Pecq, France, and Pylas from London.

## Solomon Islands violence recedes but not underlying tension

By DAVID RISING and ROD MCGUIRK Associated Press

CANBERRA, Australia (AP) — Violence receded Friday in the capital of the Solomon Islands, but the government showed no signs of addressing the underlying grievances that sparked two days of riots, including concerns about the country's increasing links with China.

Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare sought to deflect attention from domestic issues by blaming outside interference for stirring up the protesters, with a thinly veiled reference to Taiwan and the United States.

External pressures were a "very big ... influence. I don't want to name names. We'll leave it there," Sogavare said.

Honiara's Chinatown and its downtown precinct were focuses of rioters, looters and protesters who demanded the resignation of Sogavare, who has been prime minister intermittently since 2000.

Sogavare has been widely criticized by leaders of the country's most populous island of Malaita for a 2019 decision to drop diplomatic ties with Taiwan in favor of mainland China. His government, meanwhile, has been upset over millions in U.S. aid promised directly to Malaita, rather than through the central government.

Those issues are just the latest in decades of rivalry between Malaita and Guadalcanal, where the capital, Honiara, is located, said Jonathan Pryke, director of the Sydney-based Lowy Institute think tank's Pacific Islands program.

"Most of the drivers of the tension have been in the country for many decades and generations, and a lot of it is born out of the abject poverty of the country, the limited economic development opportunities and the inter-ethnic and inter-island rivalry between the two most populous islands," he said.

"So everyone's pointing fingers, but some fingers also need to be pointed at the political leaders of the Solomon Islands."

The Solomon Islands, with a population of about 700,000, are located about 1,500 kilometers (1,000 miles) northeast of Australia. Internationally they are probably still best known for the bloody fighting that took place there during World War II between the United States and Japan.

Riots and looting erupted Wednesday out of a peaceful protest in Honiara, primarily of people from Malaita demonstrating over a number of grievances. Police fired tear gas and rubber bullets at the demonstrators, who set fire to the National Parliament, a police station and many other buildings.

Protesters defied a lockdown declared by Sogavare on Wednesday to take to the streets again on Thursday.

Critics also blamed the unrest on complaints of a lack of government services and accountability, corruption and Chinese businesses giving jobs to foreigners instead of locals.

Since the 2019 shift in allegiance from Taiwan to China there has been an expectation of massive infrastructure investment from Beijing — locally rumored to be in the range of \$500 million — but with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic shortly after the shift, none of that has yet materialized.

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Malaita threatened to hold a referendum on independence over the issue, but that was quashed by Sogavare's government.

Sogavare said Friday that he stood by his government's decision to embrace Beijing, which he described as the "only issue" in the violence, which was "unfortunately influenced and encouraged by other powers."

"I'm not going to bow down to anyone. We are intact, the government's intact and we're going to defend democracy," he said.

More than broad geopolitical concerns, however, Pryke said the demonstrations really boiled down to frustration over the lack of opportunities for a largely young population, and the concentration of much of the country's wealth in the capital.

"I guarantee you the vast majority of the people involved in the rioting and looting couldn't point China or Taiwan out on a map," he said. "They were there as opportunists because they have had very limited economic opportunity. It's a very poor country with high youth unemployment, and this just shows how quickly these things can spiral out of control in a country that's volatile."

Andrew Yang, a professor at Taiwan's National Sun Yat-sen University and former deputy defense minister, said China's efforts to win diplomatic recognition from the Solomon Islands government are part of a competition for regional dominance.

"I think it's part of the power competition between United States and China because China also is extending its influence into the Pacific region and also taking advantage of this opportunity to compromise the U.S. so-called Indo-Pacific security strategy," he said. "So island countries in the South Pacific regions are a vitally important part of the U.S. Indo-Pacific security umbrella."

A plane carrying Australian police and diplomats arrived late Thursday in Honiara to help local police restore order.

Up to 50 more Australian police as well 43 defense force personnel with a navy patrol boat were scheduled to arrive on Friday.

They were requested by Sogavare under a bilateral treaty with Australia, and the presence of an independent force, though small, seemed to help quell some of the violence.

Australia has a history of assisting the Solomon Islands, stepping in after years of bloody ethnic violence known as "the tensions" in 2003. The Australian-led international police and military force called the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands helped restore the peace and left in 2017.

The Australian personnel are expected to be on hand for "a matter of weeks," according Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne.

Payne told reporters on Friday that she had no indication that other countries had stirred up the unrest.

"We have not indicated that at all," Payne said.

Australia is not assisting in the protection of the National Parliament and the executive buildings, in a sign that it was not taking political sides.

"We've been very clear. Our view is we don't want to see violence," Payne said. "We would very much hope for a return to stability."

Local journalist Gina Kekea said the foreign policy switch to Beijing with little public consultation was one of a mix of issues that led to the protests. There were also complaints that foreign companies were not providing local jobs.

"Chinese businesses and (other) Asian businesses ... seem to have most of the work, especially when it comes to extracting resources, which people feel strongly about," Kekea said.

Protesters were replaced by looters and scavengers on Friday in Chinatown, Kekea said.

"It's been two days, two whole days of looting and protesting and rioting and Honiara is just a small city," Kekea said. The capital has 85,000 residents.

"So I think that there's nothing much left for them to loot and spoil now," she said.

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison questioned whether Chinese citizens and businesses were being targeted. He described the unrest as "a bit of a mixed story" and noted Chinatown was the scene of rioting before Australia's 2003 intervention.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian on Friday condemned the violence and stressed Bei-

jing's support for the Solomon Islands government. He said China was taking measures to safeguard the safety and rights of Chinese people and institutions in the country.

"We believe that under the leadership of Prime Minister Sogavare, the Solomon government can restore order and stabilize the internal situation as soon as possible," he said.

The establishment of diplomatic ties with Beijing "has won sincere support of the people," and "any attempts to undermine the normal development of China-Solomon relations are futile," Zhao said.

Rising reported from Bangkok.

## Second group of Iraqis return after failed Europe gamble

By SALAR SALIM Associated Press

IRBIL, Iraq (AP) — Defeated but somewhat relieved, a second group of Iraqis on Friday returned home to northern Iraq after a failed quest to reach the European Union, citing maltreatment and abuse suffered at the hands of Belarusian authorities.

Over 570 people returned on two flights that landed in Irbil International Airport after 2 a.m. and 7 a.m. respectively in Iraq's northern Kurdish-run region, according to Lawk Ghafari, spokesman for the Kurdistan Regional Government. The first flight carried 170, the other over 400 returnees.

A group of children showed reporters their hands with wounds and infections. A returned migrant lowered his surgical mask to embrace his children who came to meet him at the airport.

Iraq's northern Kurdistan region has been shaken by a migrant crisis resulting from thousands of people from around the Middle East — a disproportionate number of them Iraqis — trying to cross into the EU through a backdoor opened by non-EU member Belarus. Most of the repatriated Iraqis from Belarus have been Iraqi Kurds. Last week, 430 Iraqis returned home.

Some cited the cruelty of Belarusian border authorities — from beatings to threats — and attempts to push them to cross into neighboring EU countries Poland and Lithuania. They had hoped to cross, just not under threats from the Belarusians.

Thousands of migrants remain stranded between borders. Most are fleeing conflict or hopelessness in the Middle East and aim to reach Germany or other western European countries. But Poland has taken a hard line about letting them in, and Belarus didn't want them returning to the capital of Minsk or otherwise settling in the country.

"We are very thankful for arriving home, because the humanity and justice that people say about Europe is far from reality. It is not true at all. We have been beaten badly," said Awat Nassir, a returnee at the airport.

"Now people are regretting they went there and demand to come back home, because it is 15 degrees below zero in Belarus now," he said, an exaggeration of the current temperature of around minus four degrees, but which may feel colder due to the damp and wind chill factor.

Iraqi Kurds in large numbers have chosen to make the perilous journey by selling their belongings to pay smugglers. They cite rising unemployment, endemic corruption and a recent economic crisis that slashed state salaries in the Kurdish-run region as driving their desire to leave.

Budget shortfalls spurred by a crash in oil prices last year has made life more difficult for Iraqi Kurds. The autonomous region relies on budget transfers from the federal government to pay public wages, but these have been intermittent because of a long-standing dispute over Kurdistan's independent oil export policy. As a result, austerity measures were introduced and wages were slashed last year.

Iraqi Kurds have taken to the streets to protest salary cuts and budget shortfalls. Water cannons were used to disperse dozens of student protesters in Sulaymaniyah province this week. They were mostly university students demanding the Kurdistan Regional Government pay their student allowances fallen into arrears.

The West has accused Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko of using the migrants as pawns to destabilize the 27-nation bloc in retaliation for its sanctions on his authoritarian regime. Belarus denies

engineering the crisis, which has seen migrants entering the country since summer and then trying to cross into Poland, Lithuania and Latvia.

"The most difficult thing is when you see children stuck there," said Emad Hussein, another returnee. "It is very hard."

## As Europe virus cases surge, UK plows on with its new normal

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — The bars are shut in Vienna, and the Christmas market is empty in Munich, as several European nations tighten up or even lock down to combat a spike in coronavirus infections.

Meanwhile in London, couples sip mulled wine at a seasonal market near the River Thames, full-capacity audiences fill the seats at the nearby National Theatre, and friends huddle over pints in pubs throughout the city.

Not for the first time in the pandemic, Britain is out of step with many of its neighbors. But this time, it's happy to be different.

The U.K. has endured three nationwide lockdowns and recorded nearly 145,000 deaths from the coronavirus, the highest toll in Europe after Russia. Now, it is watching as hospitals struggle with surging cases in countries including the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Austria and the Czech Republic, bringing lockdowns and restrictions. But while Prime Minister Boris Johnson has warned that a "blizzard from the east" could still ruin Britain's Christmas, many scientists say the wind is now blowing the other way.

"We are not behind Europe in this wave. They are behind us," said Paul Hunter, professor in medicine at the University of East Anglia.

The surge that is now hitting mainland Europe, driven by the highly transmissible delta strain of the virus, walloped Britain in the summer, just as the government removed all remaining legal restrictions on the economy and daily life.

Because Britain got delta in the summer, when respiratory viruses are transmitted less readily, "it wasn't so explosive as we would expect it to be in the winter, and as we're now seeing in some European countries," Mark Woolhouse, professor of infectious disease modelling at the University of Edinburgh, said.

"I think the U.K. got its delta wave at a fortuitous time, whereas Austria, for example, it's the exact opposite," he said. Austria, where average daily deaths have almost doubled in the past two weeks, has gone into lockdown, and authorities there plan to mandate vaccinations beginning Feb. 1.

The World Health Organization said this week that Europe is the only region of the world where coronavirus cases are rising, and the continent could see another 700,000 deaths by the spring unless urgent measures are taken soon.

But Britain stands somewhat apart.

Many scientists predicted the country would see a spike in cases after July 19 — dubbed "Freedom Day" by the media — when almost all restrictions were lifted. It didn't happen.

Infection rates that were then among the highest in Europe, drifted up and down but never soared again as feared, though they remain stubbornly high. Britain is recording more than 40,000 new cases a day, a level last seen during the past winter's surge. But a relatively high vaccination rate — particularly among the elderly — means hospitalizations and deaths are far lower than in previous waves. Still, 130 people a day died in the past week after testing positive for COVID-19.

Britain's hospitals have not been overwhelmed with COVID-19 cases, though they are extremely busy as the health system struggles to clear a huge backlog built up during the pandemic. Johnson's Conservative government has so far not had to trigger its "Plan B," which would reintroduce mask mandates and work-from-home orders to ease pressure on the health system.

That could yet change. The pandemic's capacity for nasty surprises was highlighted Friday when Britain banned flights from South Africa and several other countries over a new variant described by scientists as a concern because of its high number of mutations and rapid spread.

For now, life in Britain can feel unusually normal — even festive, as many embrace the holiday season



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with renewed enthusiasm. But it is a new, more constrained normal.

Visitors from countries where restrictions are still in place are sometimes taken aback by Britain's voluntary, variable approach to mask use and social distancing. But Ivo Vlaev, a behavioral scientist at the University of Warwick who has studied data from across Europe, says people in the U.K. have largely stuck to protective measures — including limiting their contacts with others — even when they were no longer required by law. Movement data suggests Britons still travel and mix less than before the pandemic.

"It seems to be the case that in U.K. people are more compliant in general across all health-protective behaviors" than in some other European nations, Vaev said.

Partly, he says, the reason is "fear — we actually are quite afraid to go out and do the usual stuff" after Britain's harsh pandemic experience.

While some European countries are turning to compulsion to get more people vaccinated, the U.K. is sticking with persuasion. Britain does not widely require proof of vaccination attend events or workplaces, and the government has ruled out mandating vaccines for everyone, though health and social care workers have been ordered to get shots.

Britain hasn't seen as much resistance to the vaccine as many other countries, and about 88% of people aged 12 and up have had at least one dose. But only about 68% of the whole population is fully vaccinated, a lower figure than in some other European nations, partly because the U.K. was slower than many of its neighbors to offer shots to children aged 12 to 15, and has not yet approved vaccines for younger kids.

The government's focus is on giving booster doses to those most vulnerable to serious illness, offering a third shot to everyone 40 and up six months after their second.

"Get your booster as soon as you can," the prime minister said this week. "Because it is by vaccinating our country that we have been able to get your staff back to their place of work, to open our theaters, our restaurants and get back for longer now than any comparator country, to something like normal life."

Some public health specialists and opposition politicians say the government is relying too much on vaccination to keep the virus at bay. They want the return of mandatory masks, social distancing and other measures.

But some epidemiologists are cautiously optimistic that enough is being done to keep a lid on the virus over the winter. Perhaps ironically, Hunter says Britain's heavy coronavirus toll puts it in a stronger position than those countries where the virus is now surging.

"They've got populations that are not as well immunized, whether that is from vaccine or infection, as we have," he said. "We still have a lot more immunity from natural infection than most European countries, and we're rolling out the booster. That is why we will have less of a troublesome winter than most."

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

## **EXPLAINER: Is China to blame for Solomon Islands unrest?**

By ROD McGUIRK Associated Press

CANBERRA, Australia (AP) — The Solomon Islands' decision to switch its diplomatic allegiance from Taiwan to Beijing has been blamed for arson and looting in the national capital Honiara, where protesters are demanding the prime minister's resignation.

Australian police, troops and diplomats are helping local police restore peace and order while trying to keep out of the domestic political dispute.

Here's a look at some of the reasons behind the turmoil:

### **ETHNIC TENSIONS OPEN OLD WOUNDS**

The Solomon Islands are famous as a battleground of World War II, the pivotal Battle of Guadalcanal named after the country's largest island where the restive capital Honiara is located.

It was then known as the British Solomon Islands Protectorate and became the Solomon Islands before independence in 1978. The South Pacific nation of 700,000 people — mostly Melanesian but also Polynesian, Micronesian, Chinese and European — is, like neighboring Australia and New Zealand, a constitutional

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monarchy with Queen Elizabeth II the head of state.

A migration of settlers from Malaita, the country's second biggest island and most populous province, to the economic opportunities on Guadalcanal and Honiara stoked ethnic tensions and eventually unrest.

In the late 1990s, native Guadalcanal islanders, known as Guales, launched a campaign of violence and intimidation to drive the Malaitans off the island. The Malaita Eagle Force militia was formed to protect them in a conflict that led the government to declare a four-month state of emergency in 1999.

Australia and New Zealand rejected the government's request for help. With the police force ethnically divided, law and order on Guadalcanal collapsed.

In 2000, the Malaita Eagle Force kidnapped Prime Minister Bartholomew Ulufa'alu, a Malaitan, because they did not consider he was doing enough for the Malaitans' cause.

Ulufa'alu resigned in exchange for his freedom, and the current Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare began the first of his four stints as the unstable nation's leader.

## WHAT'S CHINA'S ROLE IN THE CURRENT UNREST?

China has provided another cause for the community to divide, with the government supporting Beijing and the Malaitian leaders supporting Taiwan.

The self-ruled island of Taiwan split from mainland China after a civil war in 1949, but Beijing claims it as part of its territory and has persuaded all but 15 countries, most of them small and poor in Africa and Latin America, to switch recognition to the mainland.

But experts say the unrest on the Solomon Islands is driven by the same underlying causes that have undermined the social fabric for decades: inter-island and ethnic tensions, a perceived lack of sharing of resources between Guadalcanal and Malaita, widespread poverty and high youth unemployment.

"Geopolitical tensions have been the spark but not the major driver," said Jonathan Pryke, Pacific Islands program director at the Lowy Institute international policy think tank.

"I'm sure there is some degree of affection for Taiwan in Malaita, but it's also another way for Malaitans to express their frustration at the national government," he added.

Pryke said it was too soon to judge whether the Solomons would benefit financially from their 2019 switch in diplomatic relations to Beijing.

While Beijing's financial inducements to cut ties with Taiwan have not yet borne fruit, the Solomons had closed its borders throughout the pandemic, which limited Chinese engagement.

Resentment against Chinese business people is longstanding on the Solomons and resulted in much of Honiara's Chinatown being burned in 2006, and again this week.

"The Chinese communities are vulnerable in the Solomon Islands because they don't have the traditional support base," Pryke said. "They don't have the tribes the families that would have given them some extra degree of cultural isolation from this sort of unrest."

## HOW DID AUSTRALIA BECOME INVOLVED?

Australia and the Solomons signed their first bilateral security treaty in 2017. It provides a legal basis for the rapid deployment of Australian police, troops and associated civilians in the event of a major security challenge.

Australian police were in the air aboard a military transport plane within hours of Sogavare invoking the treaty on Thursday.

Australia had led a force of Pacific Islands police and troops under the Regional Assurance Mission to Solomon Islands, or RAMSI, from 2003 to 2017. It included 2,300 police and troops from 17 nations, invited by the Solomons' government. The deployment successfully ended the conflict that killed 200 people.

In the five years of ethnic and civil unrest before RAMSI arrived, the Solomons was close to becoming a failed state.

The bilateral treaty acknowledges that underlying causes of the unrest remained and posed development challenges.

"The Solomon Islands will need ongoing support to retain the gains made under RAMSI and to help build long-term stability and enduring growth," the Australian government said in 2017.

## Cases soar but Swiss eschew lockdown as COVID law vote looms

By JAMEY KEATEN Associated Press

GENEVA (AP) — Like many others in Europe, Switzerland is facing a steep rise in coronavirus cases. But its federal government, unlike others, hasn't responded with new restrictive measures. Analysts say it doesn't want to stir up more opposition to its anti-COVID-19 policies, which face a crucial test at the ballot box this weekend as critics have grown increasingly loud.

On Sunday, as part of the country's regular referendums, Swiss voters will cast ballots about the so-called "COVID-19 law" that has unlocked billions of Swiss francs (dollars) in aid for workers and businesses hit by the pandemic. The law has also imposed the use of a special COVID certificate that lets only people who have been vaccinated, recovered, or tested negative attend public events and gatherings.

If the Swiss give a thumbs-up, the government may well ratchet up its anti-COVID efforts.

The vote offers a relatively rare bellwether of public opinion specifically on the issue of government policy to fight the coronavirus in Europe, the global epicenter of the pandemic. The continent enjoys relatively high rates of vaccination compared with countries in Africa, Asia and the Middle East, but has been nearly alone in facing a surge in cases in recent weeks.

Polls suggest a solid majority of Swiss will approve the measure, which is already in effect and the rejection of which would end the restrictions — as well as the payouts. But in recent weeks, opponents have raised heaps of cash for their campaign and drawn support from abroad, including a visit from American anti-vaccination campaigner Robert F. Kennedy Jr. to a rally in the capital, Bern, this month.

Swiss weekly NZZ am Sonntag reported that campaigners have sent hundreds of petitions to government offices around the country alleging that the language in the referendum question is vague and makes no mention of the "COVID certificate" that affords access to places like restaurants and sporting events.

On Tuesday, Swiss health authorities warned of a rising "fifth wave" in the rich Alpine country, where vaccination rates are roughly in line with those in hard-hit Austria and Germany — at about two-thirds of the population. Infection rates have soared in recent weeks. The seven-day average case count in Switzerland shot up to more than 5,200 per day from mid-October to mid-November, a more than five-fold increase — with an upward curve like those in neighboring Germany and Austria.

Austria has responded with a much-ballyhooed lockdown, and Germany — which is forming a new government as Chancellor Angela Merkel's tenure nears its end — has taken some steps like requiring workers to provide their employers with proof of vaccination, recovery or a negative test set to take effect next week.

The Swiss Federal Council, the seven-member executive branch, went out of its way on Wednesday to say: "It's not the time to decree a tightening of measures nationwide," while opting for a region-by-region approach and calling on citizens to act responsibly through mask-wearing, physical distancing, and proper airing of indoor areas.

That's even though the council admitted in a statement that cases — particularly among the young — are rising and "the number of daily infections has reached a record for the year and the exponential rise is continuing." Hospitalizations — notably among the elderly — are rising too, it said, but not as fast.

Swiss Health Minister Alain Berset has insisted his government hasn't tightened restrictions because COVID-19 patients still make up only a small percentage of people in intensive-care units.

"But we also know that the number of hospitalizations lags behind the number of infections," said Pascal Sciarini, a political scientist at the University of Geneva. "One can imagine that if Switzerland didn't have this particular event — the vote on Sunday — we'd already be preparing (the) next steps."

The Swiss council may simply be holding its breath through the weekend, he suggested.

"I wouldn't be surprised if as early as next week, the tone changes," Scarini said. "It's starting to budge ... the Federal Council is surely going to wait until after the referendum."

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## Thai chain's cannabis pizza: trendy but won't get you high

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By CHALIDA EKVITTHAYAVECHNUKUL Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — One of Thailand's major fast food chains has been promoting its "Crazy Happy Pizza" this month, an under-the-radar product topped with a cannabis leaf. It's legal but won't get you high.

Veterans of the backpacker trail, familiar with the legendary pizza parlors of neighboring Cambodia's capital Phnom Penh that offer powerful marijuana as an optional condiment, might feel downright cheated.

"Of course, they cannot get high," Panusak Suensatboon, general manager of The Pizza Company, said in an interview this week. "It's just a marketing campaign. and you can taste the cannabis and then if you have enough, you maybe get a bit sleepy."

The Crazy Happy Pizza is a mashup of toppings evoking the flavors of Thailand's famous Tom Yum Gai soup along with a deep-fried cannabis leaf on top. Cannabis is also infused into the cheese crust and there's chopped cannabis in the dipping sauce. A 9-inch pie costs 499 baht (about \$15). Customers preferring a do-it-yourself variety can choose their own toppings, with a 100 baht (\$3) surcharge for two or three cannabis leaves.

The cannabis plant has been used for two major purposes: as hemp for making rope and clothing, and as an intoxicating drug, known as pot, ganja and dagga.

In recent years, a kind of middle-ground product has emerged: cannabidiol, or CBD, a chemical found in cannabis that can be processed into what is touted as a cure-all medicine. CBD can be separated out from tetrahydrocannabinol -- THC -- the chemical in cannabis that produces marijuana's high.

CBD has legitimized products made with cannabis, drawing on the mystique of marijuana without flouting the law or raising major health questions. It's become a boom industry, especially in the United States.

Recreational marijuana is still illegal in Thailand, and can earn you a fine and time in jail, even though drug laws have been liberalized in the past few years. Cannabis is regulated for medicinal use, and individuals are allowed to grow a small number of plants for their own consumption.

Thailand last December became the first country in Southeast Asia to remove specific parts and extracts of cannabis from its controlled narcotics list, and in February this year allowed them to be used in foods and beverages. The amount of THC in the CBD product must not exceed 0.2% of its total weight, virtually eliminating the possibility of getting high.

Cannabis products even before being decriminalized had become a cottage industry in Thailand, but their adoption by The Pizza Company -- operated by Minor Food Group, a subsidiary of the Stock Exchange of Thailand-listed Minor International -- boosts them into the commercial big-time.

Crazy Happy Pizza has been available at all of The Pizza Company's branches in Thailand, but sales have been lackluster, according to Panusak. It has faced several handicaps -- it cannot legally be advertised or sold to anyone under the age of 12. He estimates that when the company ends its sales promotion on Tuesday, it will have to throw away about a fifth of the cannabis leaves it acquired.

"I don't think the market is ready for cannabis products yet. We knew this since the beginning," said Panusak. "We only wanted to be the first mover to launch something new and innovative in the market." He cited durian pizza, incorporating the exotic and pricey tropical Asian fruit known for its pungent smell, as another example of his company's innovations.

"We try to get some new ingredients, anything that is in trend, and we use it and we want people to talk about it," he said.

Associate professor Wilert Puriwat, dean of Bangkok's Chulalongkorn Business School, believes that using cannabis for marketing can be effective in an initial stage, but business owners need strategies to make it work in the long run.

"In general, people who try it will not expect to get high," he said. "They just want to keep themselves trendy and take photos to post on their social media to show they have tried something that was once illegal."

He said cannabis has an emotional value that builds on a product's core value. "When people walk into your restaurant, they should come for your food and service, not for cannabis."



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## Some fear China could win from US spat with Marshall Islands

By MATTHEW LEE and NICK PERRY Associated Press

WELLINGTON, New Zealand (AP) — For decades, the tiny Marshall Islands has been a stalwart American ally. Its location in the middle of the Pacific Ocean has made it a key strategic outpost for the U.S. military.

But that loyalty is being tested amid a dispute with Washington over the terms of its "Compact of Free Association" agreement, which expires soon. The U.S. is refusing to engage the Marshallese on claims for environmental and health damage caused by dozens of nuclear tests it carried out in the 1940s and '50s, including a huge thermonuclear blast on Bikini Atoll.

The dispute has some U.S. lawmakers worried that China might be willing to step into the breach, adding to a bruising competition for geopolitical dominance between the two superpowers.

Since World War II, the U.S. has treated the Marshall Islands, along with Micronesia and Palau, much like territories. On the Marshall Islands, the U.S. has developed military, intelligence and aerospace facilities in a region where China is particularly active.

In turn, U.S. money and jobs have benefited the Marshall Islands' economy. And many Marshallese have taken advantage of their ability to live and work in the U.S., moving in the thousands to Arkansas, Hawaii and Oklahoma.

But this month, 10 Democratic and Republican members of the House of Representatives wrote to President Joe Biden's national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, about the U.S. compact talks with the Marshalls, Micronesia and Palau.

"It is distressing that these negotiations do not appear to be a priority — there have been no formal meetings since this Administration began — even as our international focus continues shifting to the Indo-Pacific," they wrote.

The lawmakers said the delays were putting the U.S. in a weaker position, and "China is all too ready to step in and provide the desperately needed infrastructure and climate resiliency investment that is sought by these long-time partners."

China's Foreign Ministry said the U.S. should face up to its responsibility to restore the environmental damage it caused with its nuclear tests. It said China was willing to engage with the Marshall Islands and other Pacific island nations on the basis of mutual respect and cooperation under the "One China Principle," in which Taiwan is viewed as part of China.

"We welcome efforts to boost economic relations and improve the quality of life between the sides," the ministry said in a statement.

China has steadily poached allies from Taiwan in the Pacific, including Kiribati and the Solomon Islands in 2019. Just this week, angry protesters in the Solomons set fire to buildings and looted stores in unrest that some have linked to the China switch.

James Matayoshi, the mayor of Rongelap Atoll on the Marshall Islands, said he and hundreds of others have remained displaced from their atoll since the nuclear tests and want to see it revitalized. He said officials have been talking with potential investors from Asia, after a previous proposal by a Chinese-Marshallese businessman fell through.

"It would be a business transaction. We don't advocate for war or any superpower influence," Matayoshi said. "But we want to be able to live in our backyard, and enjoy life here."

Like many others on the Marshall Islands, Matayoshi believes a U.S. settlement of \$150 million agreed to in the 1980s fell well short of addressing the nuclear legacy. He said his late mother was pregnant at the time of one massive nuclear blast and got exposed to radiation that was the equivalent of 25,000 X-rays before giving birth to a stillborn baby.

But the U.S. position has remained static for more than 20 years, the last time the compact came up for renegotiation. The U.S. maintains that nuclear compensation was dealt with in a "full and final settlement" and cannot be reopened.

Marshallese Senator David Paul — who is on the islands' negotiating committee and also represents Kwajalein Atoll, which is home to a major U.S. military base — said continuing high cancer rates and the

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displacement of people remain huge issues.

"Everyone knows the negotiations at that time were not fair or equitable," Paul said. "When you look at the total cost of property damage and the ongoing health issues to date, it's a drop in the bucket. It's an insult."

Various estimates put the true cost of the damage at about \$3 billion, including for repairs to a massive nuclear waste facility known as the Cactus Dome which environmentalists say is leaking toxic waste into the ocean.

A report to Congress last year from the U.S. Department of Energy said the dome contains over 100,000 cubic yards (76,000 cubic meters) of radioactively contaminated soil and debris but the structure wasn't in any immediate danger of failing. The report concluded that any contaminated groundwater flowing beneath the structure was not measurably impacting the environment.

As it did in earlier compact negotiations, the U.S. has stonewalled discussions on the nuclear legacy, something that American officials acknowledge.

"We know that's important, but there is a full and final settlement, and both sides agreed to it," said a senior U.S. official who wasn't authorized to publicly discuss the issue and spoke on condition of anonymity. "So, that issue is just not subject to being reopened. But, we're still quite willing to work with the (Marshallese) on the broader issues that are important to us and that's what we hope to do."

The U.S. State Department said the Indo-Pacific is central to U.S. foreign policy.

"We are prioritizing achieving success in the negotiations related to the Compacts with the Freely Associated States as a regional foreign policy objective," the department said.

The frustrations of the Marshallese were apparent in a letter sent last month by Foreign Minister Casten Nemra to Rep. Katie Porter, a California Democrat who chairs the House Natural Resources Committee's oversight and investigations panel.

"The State and Interior Department officials involved have been unwilling to discuss an agenda for the talks and tried to confine the discussion to their own limited proposals," Nemra wrote. "The nuclear issue clearly was one reason. All issues raised by the Marshall Islands were met with assertions that they did not have authority to discuss the matters without any indication that they would seek it."

Sen. Paul said the American approach needs to change.

"I believe the U.S. has the legal and moral obligation to make sure they clean up this debris," Paul said. "We want to make sure we get a better deal this time around. As they say, the third time is a charm."

Lee reported from Washington.

## Solomon Islands leader blames foreign powers for unrest

By DAVID RISING and ROD McGUIRK Associated Press

CANBERRA, Australia (AP) — Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare on Friday blamed foreign interference over his government's decision to switch alliances from Taiwan to Beijing for anti-government protests, arson and looting that have ravaged the capital Honiara in recent days.

But critics also blamed the unrest on complaints of a lack of government services and accountability, corruption and Chinese businesses giving jobs to foreigners instead of locals.

Honiara's Chinatown and its downtown precinct have been focuses of rioters, looters and protesters who have demanded Sogavare, who has intermittently been prime minister since 2000, to resign.

The National Parliament building, a police station and businesses have been set alight during two tumultuous days in which police failed to control the mob.

Sogavare angered many in 2019, particularly leaders of the Solomon Islands' most populous province, Malaita, when he cut the country's diplomatic ties with Taiwan.

Malaita leaders complain their island has been unfairly deprived of government investment since the change.

A plane carrying Australian police and diplomats arrived late Thursday in Honiara, where they will help

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local police efforts to restore order, Australia's Defense Minister Peter Dutton said.

Sogavare said he stood by his government's decision to embrace Beijing, which he described as the "only issue" in the violence, which was "unfortunately influenced and encouraged by other powers."

External pressures were a "very big ... influence. I don't want to name names. We'll leave it there," Sogavare said.

"I'm not going to bow down to anyone. We are intact, the government's intact and we're going to defend democracy," he added.

Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne did not agree that other countries had stirred up the unrest.

"We have not indicated that at all," Payne said.

"We've been very clear. Our view is we don't want to see violence. We would very much hope for a return to stability," she added.

Local journalist Gina Kekea said the foreign policy switch to Beijing with little public consultation was one of a mix of issues that led to the protests. There were also complaints that foreign companies were not providing local jobs.

"Chinese businesses and (other) Asian businesses ... seem to have most of the work, especially when it comes to extracting resources, which people feel strongly about," Kekea said.

Protesters had been replaced by looters and scavengers on Friday in Chinatown, Kekea said.

"It's been two days, two whole days of looting and protesting and rioting and Honiara is just a small city," Kekea said of the home to 85,000 people.

"So I think that there's nothing much left for them to loot and spoil now," she added.

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison on Thursday committed troops, police and diplomats to help local police restore order and protect critical infrastructure.

Australia would not assist in the protection of the National Parliament and the executive buildings, in a sign that Australia was not taking political sides.

Some observers argue Australia intervened quickly to avoid Chinese security forces moving in to restore order.

But Morrison said Sogavare had asked for help because he trusted Australia.

"The Solomon Islands reached out to us first ... as family because they trust us and we've worked hard for that trust in the Pacific," Morrison said.

"That is our region and we're standing up to secure our region with our partners, our friends, our family and allies," he added.

Sogavare requested assistance from Australia under a bilateral security treaty that has existed since 2017, when Australian peacekeepers last left the Solomon Islands.

Australia led an international police and military force called the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands that restored peace in the country after bloody ethnic violence from 2003 until 2017.

Morrison questioned whether Chinese citizens and businesses were being targeted. He described the unrest as "a bit of a mixed story" and noted Chinatown was the scene of rioting before Australia's 2003 intervention.

China, meanwhile, expressed serious concern about recent attacks on some Chinese citizens and institutions, without providing details.

"We believe that under the leadership of Prime Minister Sogavare, the Solomon Islands government can restore social order and stability as soon as possible," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian said on Thursday.

He said that economic and other cooperation since the establishment of diplomatic relations has benefited both sides.

"Any attempts to undermine the normal development of China-Solomon relations are futile," he said.

Dutton said a plane carrying 23 federal police officers and several diplomats flew from the Australian capital Canberra to Honiara late Thursday.

Up to 50 more police as well 43 defense force personnel with a navy patrol boat were scheduled to ar-

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rive on Friday.

The Australian force would also be equipped to "provide a medical response," Dutton said.

"It's certainly a dangerous situation on the ground. We've seen the rioting that's taken place, the arson and the general disorder that's there at the moment as well," Dutton said.

"So there's a lot of work for the police to do on the ground," he added.

Sogavare declared a lockdown Wednesday after about 1,000 people gathered in protest in Honiara, demanding his resignation over a host of domestic issues.

The protesters breached the National Parliament building and burned the thatched roof of a nearby building, the government said. They also set fire to a police station and other buildings.

Sogavare ordered the capital locked down from 7 p.m. Wednesday through 7 p.m. Friday after saying he had "witnessed another sad and unfortunate event aimed at bringing a democratically elected government down."

Despite an announcement from the Solomon Islands police force that they would be conducting increased patrols through Honiara amid the lockdown, protesters again took to the streets Thursday.

Local media reported that many of the protesters were from Malaita, whose premier, Daniel Suidani, has been at odds with Sogavare, whom he accuses of being too close to Beijing.

Suidani said he was not responsible for the violence in Honiara, but told the Solomon Star News that he agreed with the calls for Sogavare to resign.

The Solomon Islands, about 1,500 kilometers (1,000 miles) northeast of Australia, were the scene of bloody fighting during World War II.

After it was captured by the Japanese, U.S. Marines landed on the island of Guadalcanal in August 1942 to open a campaign to wrest back control. They were successful, though fighting in and around the Solomon Islands continued through the end of the war.

Rising reported from Bangkok.

## Former Brazil Olympic boss sentenced to jail for corruption

By MAURICIO SAVARESE AP Sports Writer

SAO PAULO (AP) — Carlos Arthur Nuzman, the head of the Brazilian Olympic Committee for more than two decades, was sentenced to 30 years and 11 months in jail for allegedly buying votes for Rio de Janeiro to host the 2016 Olympics.

The ruling by Judge Marcelo Bretas became public Thursday.

Nuzman, who also headed the Rio 2016 organizing committee, was found guilty of corruption, criminal organization, money laundering and tax evasion. The 79-year-old executive won't be jailed until all his appeals are heard.

He and his lawyer did not comment on the decision.

Bretas also sentenced to jail former Rio Gov. Sergio Cabral, businessman Arthur Soares and Leonardo Gryner, who was the Rio 2016 committee director-general of operations. Investigators say all three and Nuzman coordinated to bribe the former president of the International Association of Athletics Federations, Lamine Diack, and his son Papa Diack for votes.

Cabral, who has been in jail since 2016 and faces a series of other convictions and investigations, told Bretas two years ago he had paid about \$2 million in exchange for up to six votes in the International Olympic Committee (IOC) meeting that awarded Rio the Olympic and Paralympic Games. He said the money had come from a debt owed to him by Soares.

Cabral, who governed Rio state between 2003 and 2010, added that another \$500,000 was paid later to Diack's son with the aim of securing three more votes of IOC members.

Bretas' ruling labels Nuzman as "one of the main responsables for the promotion and the organization of the criminal scheme, given his position in the Brazilian Olympic Committee and before international authorities." The judge also said the sports executive "headed and coordinated action of the other agents,



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clearly as a leader" to illegally garnish support at the IOC.

The judge said he will send the results of the investigation to authorities in Senegal and France, where Papa Diack and Lamine Diack live, respectively.

Rio's bid beat Chicago, Tokyo and Madrid to host the 2016 Games.

The investigation in Brazil began in 2017 after French newspaper Le Monde found members of the IOC had been bribed three days before the 2009 session in Copenhagen where Rio was picked to host the Games.

More AP Olympics: <https://apnews.com/hub/olympic-games> and [https://twitter.com/AP\\_Sports](https://twitter.com/AP_Sports)

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## Raiders beat Cowboys 36-33 in OT on field goal after penalty

By SCHUYLER DIXON AP Pro Football Writer

ARLINGTON, Texas (AP) — Derek Carr and the Las Vegas Raiders got the third-down help they needed from Dallas cornerback Anthony Brown.

Daniel Carlson kicked a 29-yard field goal in overtime after Brown's fourth pass-interference penalty kept the drive alive, and the Raiders ended a three-game losing streak by beating the Cowboys 36-33 on Thursday.

Carlson's career-best fifth field goal came after Brown was called for interference on Zay Jones on third-and-18. All four of Brown's interference penalties came on third-down incompletions.

"The penalties obviously helped," said Carr, whose 373 yards passing included a 56-yard touchdown to DeSean Jackson for the first points. "If they weren't holding, we probably would have hit those plays."

The Raiders had just two third-down conversions total the previous two games and were 3 of 13 in this one. But Brown topped that total all by himself.

"Just one of them days," Brown said. "I feel like I was in position for all of them, tried to turn my head. On some of them I did have my head turned. Just try to get better."

Both teams had season highs in penalties and yards. Dallas, the NFL leader in penalty yards coming in, had 14 for a franchise-record 166 yards and Las Vegas 14 for 110.

A holding call on perennial Pro Bowl left tackle Tyron Smith in his first game back after missing three with an ankle injury negated a Dallas touchdown early in the fourth quarter. The Cowboys settled for a field goal.

"Twenty-eight penalties, I don't know what the hell you want me to say," Dallas coach Mike McCarthy said. "Write what you want. I'm all for it."

The Raiders (6-5) won on Thanksgiving for the first time since 1968. It was their fourth appearance on the holiday since then, with the previous two losses coming at the Cowboys.

"It kind of gave me goose bumps, I'm not going to lie," Carr said. "When that kick went through, I had a lot of memories as a kid."

Dak Prescott had 209 of his 375 yards passing in the fourth quarter. His 32-yard touchdown pass to Dalton Schultz and 2-point conversion toss to the tight end pulled the Cowboys (7-4) even at 30 with 2:54 remaining after they trailed almost from the start.

Carlson put Las Vegas ahead 33-30 with a career-long 56-yarder with 1:52 remaining. Greg Zuerlein, who missed an extra point after the first Dallas TD, answered with a 45-yarder with 19 seconds to go.

Tony Pollard had a 100-yard kickoff return for Dallas in the third quarter, but was stopped inside the 15 to start overtime. The Cowboys went three-and-out after a penalty pushed them back to the 7, and the Raiders finished off the third victory for the AFC West against the NFC East-leading Cowboys in the past four games.

Brown had his back to Jones when Carr threw the pass with Las Vegas at its 43. The penalty put the Raiders at the Dallas 24, and the winning kick came after the Cowboys were penalized twice for rushing past the line of scrimmage before the snap.

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Carr was 24 of 39 without an interception, and Hunter Renfrow had career highs in catches (eight) and yards (134). Marcus Mariota scored from the 3 on a shotgun keeper.

The Dallas offense struggled early without top receivers Amari Cooper (COVID-19 protocols) and CeeDee Lamb (concussion) and running back Ezekiel Elliott nursing a right knee injury. The NFL's No. 1 offense bounced back to finish with 437 yards, but the Raiders had a season-high 509.

"We had some explosive plays and we gave up some explosive plays," said interim coach Rich Bisaccia, who left after five seasons with the Cowboys to join the Raiders in 2018.

Jackson tip-toed successfully on the sideline to open the scoring and drew one of the interference penalties against Brown in the end zone to set up Josh Jacobs' 1-yard TD.

Sean McKeon had his first career touchdown, a 10-yard catch for the Cowboys' first points. Elliott, who was limited to nine carries for 25 yards, had a 1-yard TD.

## PAIR OF EJECTIONS

Kelvin Joseph of Dallas and Roderic Teamer of the Raiders were ejected after getting personal foul penalties at the end of a Las Vegas punt on the first possession of the second half. Field judge Tom Hill ended up with a small cut on his chin during the fracas on the Raiders' sideline.

It was the second consecutive week the Cowboys had a run-in with the opponent during a punt. And the rookie Joseph ended up with the rest of the game off a week after staying home for personal reasons.

## GO LONG

Jackson, who spent the first six of his 14 years with Philadelphia, has six career TD catches against his former NFC East rival. Five of those have covered at least 56 yards, including a 91-yarder with the Eagles in 2010 and an 81-yarder in his second stint with Philadelphia last season.

## INJURIES

Raiders TE Darren Waller was ruled out after leaving the game twice, first with a back injury and then a knee issue. ... DE Carl Nassib also injured a knee and didn't return, while CB Brandon Facyson was ruled out with a concussion.

## UP NEXT

Raiders: Another NFC East opponent, this time at home against Washington on Dec. 5.

Cowboys: At New Orleans next Thursday. It's the sixth time in eight seasons Dallas has followed Thanksgiving with another Thursday game.

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

## Biden wishes Americans happy, closer-to-normal Thanksgiving

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

NANTUCKET, Mass. (AP) — President Joe Biden on Thursday wished Americans a happy and closer-to-normal Thanksgiving, the second celebrated in the shadow of the coronavirus pandemic, in remarks welcoming the resumption of holiday traditions by millions of U.S. families — including his own.

"As we give thanks for what we have, we also keep in our hearts those who have been lost and those who have lost so much," the president said in a videotaped greeting recorded with first lady Jill Biden at the White House before their trip to Nantucket, Massachusetts, for the holiday.

On the island, the Bidens visited the Coast Guard station at Brant Point to meet with personnel there and virtually with U.S. service members from around the world. "I'm not joking when I say I'm thankful for these guys," the president said when asked what he was thankful for, referring to the Coast Guard members standing ramrod straight before him on the grounds as he departed.

Reporters were kept out of the room for Biden's virtual remarks, apparently because of tight space in the building. Well-wishers waved and cheered as Biden's motorcade navigated the island's narrow paved and cobblestone streets to and from the Coast Guard compound.

Biden, whose late son Beau was a major in the Delaware Army National Guard, said he has watched U.S. service members in action around the world, from the South China Sea and Iraq and Afghanistan

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to South America. He said when foreigners wonder what America is, "they don't see us here," meaning civilians. "They see them," he said of members of the Coast Guard and the other branches of the U.S. military. "It makes me proud."

From Nantucket, the Bidens also called in to the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, briefly bantering on air with NBC broadcaster Al Roker. Shut out a year ago, spectators again lined the route in Manhattan as some 8,000 participants joined the parade. Parade employees and volunteers had to be vaccinated against COVID-19 and wear masks.

The extended first family went traditional for their Thanksgiving menu: roasted turkey, stuffing using a grandmother's recipe and other fixings. Dessert was three kinds of pie, and — in no surprise to those who followed Biden in and out of ice cream shops on the campaign trail — chocolate chip ice cream.

Biden and his wife started spending Thanksgiving in Nantucket since before they were married in 1977 because they were looking for a way out of choosing whose family to spend it with. They did not visit in 2015 following Beau's death earlier that year from brain cancer at age 46, or in 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic put the kibosh on big family gatherings.

Biden instead dined at home in Delaware last year with just his wife, daughter Ashley and her husband.

But this year, the president joined the millions of Americans who are celebrating the holiday with big groups of loved ones. Biden's entire family flew up with him Tuesday night on Air Force One to resume the Thanksgiving tradition: his wife; son Hunter and his wife, Melissa and their toddler son Beau; daughter Ashley; and grandchildren Naomi, Finnegan, Maisy, Natalie and young Hunter, as well as Naomi's fiance, Peter Neal.

The president has credited the roll-out of COVID-19 vaccines with helping ease the return of family gatherings this holiday season, although a resurgent virus has fueled an increase in new infections in the U.S. The president and first lady both have had their full vaccine dose, and a booster.

Naomi Biden and her fiance rode bicycles along on a local path just before her grandfather's SUV departed the secluded home where the family is staying. The sprawling compound is owned by David Rubenstein, a billionaire philanthropist and co-founder of the Carlyle Group private equity firm.

Biden's visit, his first as president, is markedly different from his previous holidays here when he was a U.S. senator and later vice president. Then, he might have been seen walking around downtown.

Biden lost much of his freedom to move around on his own when he became president and now travels with a large group of security personnel, White House and other officials, and journalists. His every public move is closely watched by the U.S. Secret Service and other law enforcement.

Jill Biden was heard telling the Coast Guard members she would see them again Friday night at Nantucket's annual Christmas tree lighting, another Biden tradition.

"We're all going together," she said of her family. The tree lighting ceremony is where Beau Biden proposed to his wife, Hallie, in 2001. They were wed on the island the following year.

Biden is expected to return to the White House on Sunday.

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Associated Press writer Calvin Woodward in Washington contributed to this report.

## France calls for European aid after 27 migrant deaths at sea

By OLEG CETINIC and JOHN LEICESTER Associated Press

CALAIS, France (AP) — Helicopters buzzed above the waves and vessels were already scouring the cold waters when French maritime rescue volunteer Charles Devos added his boat to the frantic search for a flimsy migrant craft that foundered in the English Channel, killing at least 27.

What Devos found was gruesome. But not, he later sorrowfully acknowledged, wholly unexpected. With migrants often setting off by the hundreds in flotillas of unseaworthy and overloaded vessels into the busy shipping lane crisscrossed by hulking freighters, and frequently beset by treacherous weather, waves and currents, Devos had long feared that tragedy would ensue.

That came this week, with the deadliest migration accident to date on the dangerous stretch of sea that

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separates France and Britain.

"We picked up six floating bodies. We passed by an inflatable craft that was deflated. The little bit of air remaining kept it afloat," Devos told reporters.

"I'd been somewhat expecting it because I'd say, 'It's going to end with a drama,'" he said.

France and Britain appealed Thursday for European assistance, promised stepped-up efforts to combat people-smuggling networks and also traded blame and barbs in the wake of Wednesday's deadly sinking that shone a light on the scale and complexity of Europe's migration problems.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson sent French President Emmanuel Macron and the EU leadership a letter Thursday proposing joint sea, air and land patrols starting as soon as next week. France has resisted the idea. Johnson also proposed an agreement allowing Britain to send back migrants to France.

Macron appealed to neighboring European countries to do more to stop illegal migration into France, saying that when migrants reach French shores with hopes of heading on to Britain "it is already too late."

Macron said France is deploying army drones as part of stepped-up efforts to patrol its northern coastline and help rescue migrants at sea. But he also said that a greater collective effort is needed, referring to France as a "transit country" for Britain-bound migrants.

"We need to strengthen cooperation with Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, but also the British and the (European) Commission," he said on a visit to Croatia. "We need stronger European cooperation."

Migration is an explosive issue in Europe, where leaders often accuse one another of not doing enough to either prevent migrants from entering their countries or from continuing on to other nations.

Ministers from France, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and Britain and EU officials will meet on Sunday to discuss increasing efforts to crack down on migrant-smuggling networks, Macron's government announced.

They will convene in Calais, one of the French coastal towns where migrants gather, looking for ways to cross to the British coast that is visible from France on clear days. Seaside communities on both sides of the channel were reeling Thursday from the sinking's horrific toll.

"This was unfortunately something that could have been foreseen, a scenario of horror that we'd feared and dreaded," said Ludovic Hochart, a police union official in Calais.

Across the channel, in the British port of Dover, small business owner Paula Elliot said: "It's dreadful that people have lost their lives."

"The vessels that they take, are traveling in, are not fit for purpose," she said. "They probably don't understand how arduous the journey is going to be, and especially at this time of year, it's so much colder than in the summer."

Devos, the rescue volunteer, told reporters in comments broadcast by coastal radio Delta FM that the flimsy craft used by migrants for the crossing are increasingly overloaded, with as many as 50 people aboard.

Macron described the dead in Wednesday's sinking as "victims of the worst system, that of smugglers and human traffickers."

France has never had so many officers mobilized against illegal migration and its commitment is "total," he said.

Ever-increasing numbers of people fleeing conflict or poverty in Afghanistan, Sudan, Iraq, Eritrea or elsewhere are risking the perilous journey from France, hoping to win asylum or find better opportunities in Britain.

The crossings have tripled this year compared to 2020. Shipwrecks on the scale of that seen Wednesday are not uncommon in the Mediterranean Sea, where just this year about 1,600 people have died or gone missing, according to U.N. estimates.

The French prosecutors' office tasked with investigating the sinking said the dead included 17 men, seven women and two boys and one girl thought to be teenagers. Magistrates were investigating potential charges of homicide, unintentional wounding, assisting illegal migration and criminal conspiracy, the prosecutors' office said.

Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin said children and pregnant women were among the dead. Two survivors from the sinking were treated for hypothermia. One is Iraqi, the other Somali, Darmanin said. He



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said authorities are working to determine the victims' nationalities.

Destabilized by shock and sadness, aid workers and Calais residents held a silent vigil Thursday night in the port city to honor the dead, huddling beneath a cold rain and lighting candles in their memory.

Macron's government vowed to bring those responsible for the tragedy to justice, piling pressure on investigators. Darmanin announced the arrests of five alleged smugglers who he said are suspected of being linked to the sinking. He gave no details. The prosecutors' office investigating the deaths confirmed five arrests since Wednesday but said they didn't appear to be linked to its probe.

Darmanin said a suspected smuggler arrested overnight was driving a vehicle registered in Germany and had bought inflatable boats there.

He said criminal groups in Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany and Britain are behind people-smuggling networks. He called on those countries to cooperate better against smugglers, saying they don't always respond fully to French judicial requests for information.

"Britain and France must work together. We must no longer be, in effect, the only ones able to fight the smugglers," the minister said.

In their immediate response to the sinking, French authorities initially gave differing figures on the number of dead, from at least 27 to 31. The figure that Darmanin used Thursday morning on RTL radio was 27.

The minister also took a swipe at British government migration policies, saying France expels more people living in the country without legal permission than the U.K. Illegal migration from France's northern shores to Britain has long been a source of tension between the two countries, even as their police forces work together to try to stop crossings. The issue is often used by politicians on both sides pushing an anti-migration agenda.

Darmanin also suggested that by hiring people living in the country illegally, British employers are encouraging illegal migration to English shores.

"English employers use this labor to make the things that the English manufacture and consume," he said. "We say 'reform your labor market.'"

U.K. officials, meanwhile, criticize France for rejecting their offer of British police and border officers to conduct joint patrols along the channel coast with French police.

Macron advocated an immediate funding boost for the European Union's border agency, Frontex, according to his office.

"France will not allow the Channel to become a cemetery," Macron said.

Leicester reported from Le Pecq, France. Lori Hinnant in Paris and David Keyton in Dover, England, contributed.

Follow AP's global migration coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/migration>

## Families struggle with how to hold 2nd pandemic Thanksgiving

By BOBBY CAINA CALVAN and THOMAS PEIPERT Associated Press

(AP) — Back in the spring, Pauline Criel and her cousins talked about reuniting for Thanksgiving at her home near Detroit after many painful months of seclusion because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

But the virus had a different plan. Michigan is now the nation's hot spot. Hospitals there are teeming with patients, and schools are scaling back in-person learning. A resurgent virus has pushed new infections in the U.S. to 95,000 daily, hospitals in Minnesota, Colorado and Arizona are also under pressure, and health officials are pleading with unvaccinated people not to travel.

Criel's big family feast was put on hold. She is roasting a turkey and whipping together a pistachio fluff salad — an annual tradition — but only for her, her husband and two grown boys.

"I'm going to wear my stretchy pants and eat too much — and no one's going to care," she said.

Her story reflects the Thanksgiving dilemma that families across America are facing as the gatherings become burdened with the same political and coronavirus debates consuming other arenas.

As they gather for turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes and pie, they are confronted with a list of ques-

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tions: Can they once again hold big get-togethers? Can they gather at all? Should they invite unvaccinated family members? Should they demand a negative test before a guest is allowed at the dinner table or a spot on the sofa for an afternoon of football?

"I know that it might be overkill that we're not sharing Thanksgiving here with my cousins, but better be safe than sorry, right?" said Criel, a 58-year-old data administrator for a finance company.

Jocelyn Ragusin, an accountant from Littleton, Colorado, is taking a different approach by prioritizing family time over COVID-19 concerns even as rising case counts and overwhelmed hospitals triggered new mask mandates in the Denver area this week. Ragusin, whose husband contracted the virus and spent four days in the intensive care unit in October 2020, said she is willing to accept a certain level of risk to have a sense of community back.

She said about seven or eight family members would be gathering for the holiday and that the group had not discussed one another's vaccination status beforehand, in part because they "kind of know" already who got the shots and who has had the virus already.

"Getting together is worth it. And getting together and sharing meals, and sharing life," Ragusin said while picking up her mother at the airport in Denver. "We're just not made to live in isolation."

The desire to bring family and friends back together for Thanksgiving was evident Wednesday in San Francisco, where the line at one grocery store stretched out the door and around the corner.

Mari Arreola was in line to buy ingredients to make tamales for a meal that will also feature salsa, ham, mashed potatoes and gravy. She sees the gathering of 12 family members this year as a symbol of hope that things are getting better. A year ago, she spent Thanksgiving only with her husband, mom and one daughter.

"We felt really disconnected, and we were all living our lives based on fear, and it looked like an apocalypse scene outside every time you left your house," the San Francisco tech consultant said of last year. "It was really scary, but now things are different."

Even in better times, Thanksgiving has always been a trying occasion for Nadia Brown, a political science professor at Georgetown University, who loathes the awkward and divisive conversations about politics, race and other hot-button issues. COVID-19 has only made the holiday worse.

She and her husband were hoping to have a big family gathering for Thanksgiving at their home near Silver Spring, Maryland, but the start of a winter surge and lingering concerns about breakthrough cases scuttled those plans. She recently told her father and his family — even if they are vaccinated — that they must be tested to prove they are virus-free or sit out Thanksgiving dinner.

With two of Brown's three daughters, 2 and 4, unable to get vaccinated, she doesn't want to take any chances — "because we don't know the long term impacts of COVID on children," she explained.

Her decision means her father, Dr. Joseph Brown, won't be coming from his home about three hours away in New Brunswick, New Jersey. The dentist is vaccinated, but said he didn't have time to get tested.

"It hurts me a lot. I want to see my grandkids," said Joseph Brown, while adding, "I understand her situation. I really do."

Riva Letchinger, who has seen the ravages of the pandemic firsthand as a medical student, set aside her worries to travel from her home in New York City to Washington to resume Thanksgiving festivities with her family. They skipped the gathering last year.

She said she has been reassured that everyone there has been vaccinated and received booster shots, but she is also worried about her own virus status, even though she is fully vaccinated.

"I have this consistent fear of hurting someone in my family or getting them sick because I see so many COVID patients every day," she said.

Despite her trepidations, Letchinger is looking forward to the annual family ritual, which includes a generous complement of Jewish favorites — like the golumpkis, or stuffed cabbage, that her late aunt Susie used to bring to the Thanksgiving feast.

But the celebration will have somber undertones as well. The family lost two loved ones, both Holocaust survivors, after bouts with COVID-19 last year.

Associated Press writer Olga R. Rodriguez contributed to this report from San Francisco.

## Russia: Death toll in Siberian coal mine blast raised to 52

By DARIA LITVINOVA and VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — A devastating explosion in a Siberian coal mine Thursday left 52 miners and rescuers dead about 250 meters (820 feet) underground, Russian officials said.

Hours after a methane gas explosion and fire filled the mine with toxic fumes, rescuers found 14 bodies but then were forced to halt the search for 38 others because of a buildup of methane and carbon monoxide gas from the fire. Another 239 people were rescued.

The state Tass and RIA-Novosti news agencies cited emergency officials as saying that there was no chance of finding any more survivors in the Listvyazhnaya mine, in the Kemerovo region of southwestern Siberia.

The Interfax news agency cited a representative of the regional administration who also put the death toll from Thursday's accident at 52, saying they died of carbon monoxide poisoning.

It was the deadliest mine accident in Russia since 2010, when two methane explosions and a fire killed 91 people at the Rapsadskaya mine in the same Kemerovo region.

A total of 285 people were in the Listvyazhnaya mine early Thursday when the blast sent smoke that quickly filled the mine through the ventilation system. Rescuers led to the surface 239 miners, 49 of whom were injured, and found 11 bodies.

Later in the day, six rescuers also died while searching for others trapped in a remote section of the mine, the news reports said.

Regional officials declared three days of mourning.

Russia's Deputy Prosecutor General Dmitry Demeshin told reporters that the fire most likely resulted from a methane explosion caused by a spark.

The miners who survived described their shock after reaching the surface.

"Impact. Air. Dust. And then, we smelled gas and just started walking out, as many as we could," one of the rescued miners, Sergey Golubin, said in televised remarks. "We didn't even realize what happened at first and took some gas in."

Another miner, Rustam Chebelkov, recalled the dramatic moment when he was rescued along with his comrades as chaos engulfed the mine.

"I was crawling and then I felt them grabbing me," he said. "I reached my arms out to them, they couldn't see me, the visibility was bad. They grabbed me and pulled me out, if not for them, we'd be dead."

Explosions of methane released from coal beds during mining are rare but they cause the most fatalities in the coal mining industry.

The Interfax news agency reported that miners have oxygen supplies normally lasting for six hours that could only be stretched for a few more hours.

Russia's Investigative Committee has launched a criminal probe into the fire over violations of safety regulations that led to deaths. It said the mine director and two senior managers were detained.

President Vladimir Putin extended his condolences to the families of the dead and ordered the government to offer all necessary assistance to those injured.

Thursday's fire wasn't the first deadly accident at the Listvyazhnaya mine. In 2004, a methane explosion left 13 miners dead.

In 2007, a methane explosion at the Ulyanovskaya mine in the Kemerovo region killed 110 miners in the deadliest mine accident since Soviet times.

In 2016, 36 miners were killed in a series of methane explosions in a coal mine in Russia's far north. In the wake of the incident, authorities analyzed the safety of the country's 58 coal mines and declared 20 of them, or 34%, potentially unsafe.

The Listvyazhnaya mine wasn't among them at the time, according to media reports.

Russia's state technology and ecology watchdog, Rostekhnadzor, inspected the mine in April and registered 139 violations, including breaching fire safety regulations.

## **Their own words may have doomed men who killed Ahmaud Arbery**

By RUSS BYNUM and KATE BRUMBACK Associated Press

The video of Ahmaud Arbery's shotgun death was a shocking piece of evidence that suddenly brought the Black man's killing into the national consciousness.

But the murder convictions of the three white men who chased him may have been secured as much by their own words to investigators the day of the shooting.

Greg McMichael, who was in the bed of a pickup truck when his son killed Arbery, told police the Black man "was trapped like a rat" and he told Arbery: "Stop, or I'll blow your f---ing head off!"

Statements like that allowed prosecutors to give context to the short video that didn't show the entire shooting and had little of the five minutes that the men chased Arbery.

"It's those statements that screwed the defense more than the video. If they had never talked to police and they said we saw him taking something from the property and running — there's an OK shot the jury might have acquitted them," said appellate attorney Andrew Fleischman, who followed the trial from Atlanta.

### WHAT THEY SAID:

The shooter, Travis McMichael, his dad, Greg McMichael and neighbor William "Roddie" Bryan all spoke extensively and candidly with Glynn County investigators just hours after Arbery was killed in their Brunswick, Georgia, neighborhood in February 2020.

They told police they weren't sure exactly what Arbery had done wrong, which would later be a big blow to their defense that they were making a citizen's arrest.

The citizen's arrest law, largely repealed by lawmakers after Arbery's death, required a person to see or have immediate knowledge of a crime being committed or have reasonable suspicion that someone is fleeing a felony in order to justify a citizen's arrest.

"I don't think the guy has actually stolen anything out of there, or if he did it was early in the process. But he keeps going back over and over again to this damn house," Greg McMichael said, according to a transcript of the interview that Glynn County police Sgt. Roderic Nohilly read in court.

Bryan was on his front porch when he saw Arbery run past with the McMichaels' truck close behind. He told police he didn't recognize any of them, or know what prompted the chase, but still joined in after calling out: "Y'all got him?"

In an interview with the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, Bryan said he wanted to take a photo of Arbery to show police, but couldn't point to any crimes Arbery had committed.

"I figured he had done something wrong," Bryan said. "I didn't know for sure."

The statements allowed prosecutor Linda Dunikoski to methodically pick apart the defense's arguments.

"Nobody was talking about a citizen's arrest. And I don't mean using the magic words 'citizen's arrest.' I mean no one's saying, 'We saw the guy commit a burglary and we were going to hold on to him so we could turn him over to police because he committed this crime,'" Atlanta defense attorney Page Pate said.

### DEFENSE CASE

That left the attorneys for the men to struggle to explain away their statements.

"The evidence suggests that Roddie Bryan legitimately struggles to find the right words," Bryan's lawyer, Kevin Gough, told jurors in his closing argument Monday.

Travis McMichael, testifying in his own defense, said he was in shock when he first spoke to police, calling the shooting the most traumatic event of his life.

Greg McMichael's lawyer suggested maybe he never shouted at Arbery: "Stop, or I'll blow your f---ing head off" like he told police because the remark wasn't recorded on the cellphone video of the shooting or the 911 call Greg McMichael made to police. Both of those recordings covered only a small part of the five-minute chase that ended in Arbery's death.



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"You only have a handful of defenses to deal with what is basically a confession," Pate said.

## FAMILIAR FACES

Greg McMichael was a former investigator in the Glynn County district attorney's office and may have felt like he could navigate trouble among his acquaintances and friends.

It worked for a while. The men weren't charged for more than two months — only after the video of the shooting surfaced and the case was turned over to the Georgia Bureau of Investigation. State agents charged the men two days later.

"This is just a case of a client who talked himself out of trouble and those statements later turned out to put him back into it," Fleischman said.

Phone records show Greg McMichael called his former boss, District Attorney Jackie Johnson, just after the shooting. Johnson handed off the case to an out-of-town prosecutor, who cited the citizen's arrest law in recommending no charges. A third prosecutor was reviewing the case when the video surfaced and handed it off to the state.

Johnson was indicted on a felony charge of violating her oath of office and a misdemeanor count of obstructing police for her role in the investigation. Authorities have released little information on Johnson's actions other than to say she never disclosed that she asked the second prosecutor to advise police in the immediate aftermath of Arbery's killing.

Jeffrey Collins contributed to this report.

## Despite deal, Sudanese rally to demand military rulers leave

By NOHA ELHENNAWY Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — Thousands of Sudanese took to the streets on Thursday in the capital of Khartoum, renewing their demand for a fully civilian government and denouncing the country's military rulers who were behind the October coup.

Since the takeover, protesters have repeatedly taken to the streets in some of the largest demonstrations in the past years. Sudanese security forces have cracked down on the rallies and have killed more than 40 protesters so far, according to activist groups.

Meanwhile, the Sudanese Doctors Committee, which is part of the pro-democracy movement, said that 17 people were killed in clashes between Arab and non-Arab tribes in the restive province of West Darfur last week. The tribal violence is unrelated to the anti-coup protests.

The U.N. mission to Sudan on Thursday expressed serious concern over reports of the killings in the Darfur area of Jebel Moon. It appeared that reports of the violence were only now emerging due to the near-complete communications blackout imposed after the coup.

Thursday's demonstrations followed the military's signing of a power-sharing deal with the prime minister, after he was released from house arrest and reinstated by the generals as head of government. The agreement came almost a month after the generals orchestrated the coup that deposed Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok and detained dozens of politicians and activists.

Hamdok's reinstatement was the biggest concession made by the military since its Oct. 25 coup but leaves the country's transition to democracy mired in crisis. Sudan's key pro-democracy groups and political parties have dismissed the deal as falling short of their demands for a fully civilian rule.

Sudan has been struggling with its transition to a democratic government since the overthrow of autocrat Omar al-Bashir in 2019, following a mass uprising against three decades of his rule.

Protesters marched Thursday through Khartoum, beating drums and waving Sudanese flags. Many chanted: "The people want to bring down the regime" and "Woe to the military!"

The Sudanese Professionals Association, the group that spearheaded the uprising that culminated in al-Bashir's ouster, had called for the rallies and vowed to carry on with protests until "the corrupt military junta is brought down and prosecuted for their crimes."

Similar protests were held elsewhere in Sudan, including in the provinces of Kassala, North Darfur, West

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Kordofan and Northern Sudan. Activists circulated videos on social media showing tear gas being fired at protesters. There was no immediate word of any injuries.

The deal that Hamdok signed with the military on Sunday envisions an independent, technocratic Cabinet to be led by the prime minister until new elections are held. However, the government would still remain under military oversight though Hamdok claimed he will have the power to appoint ministers.

The agreement has angered Sudan's pro-democracy movement, which accuses Hamdok of allowing himself to serve as a fig leaf for continued military rule.

The deal also stipulates that all political detainees arrested following the Oct. 25 coup be released. So far, several ministers and politicians have been freed. The number of those still in detention remains unknown.

On Wednesday, Hamdok told a local Sudanese television channel that unless all are released, "the deal will be worthless."

The statement by the doctors committee on the tribal violence said clashes on Nov. 17 in West Darfur's Jebel Moon killed 17 and wounded at least 12.

Earlier, Adam Regal, a spokesman for a local organization that helps run refugee camps in Darfur, told The Associated Press that the conflict grew out of a land dispute. He alleged that Rapid Support Forces, a paramilitary unit controlled by the country's second most powerful general, had eventually intervened on behalf of Arab tribes. The clashes subsided on Friday, he said.

The International Organization for Migration said Wednesday that 9,800 people have been displaced in the area of Jebel Moon. Some fled to nearby villages and others crossed the border into Chad. At least six villages were affected, some of them were burned down, according to the U.N. migration agency.

In January, tribal violence killed 470 people in Darfur, in one of the worst episodes since the vicious war of the 2000s there. The latest bloodletting has sparked fears the region could slide back into conflict and raised questions over the government's ability to implement a peace deal and protect civilians.

Al-Bashir had waged a scorched-earth counterinsurgency in Darfur against ethnic minority rebels who blamed the government for economic and political marginalization. Government forces and primarily Arab militias known as janjaweed are accused of widespread atrocities in the conflict, which killed over 300,000 people and forced 2.7 million to flee. Al-Bashir, now imprisoned in Khartoum, was indicted for war crimes and genocide by the International Criminal Court for the Darfur violence.

The fighting in Darfur gradually declined but violence continues to flare, as Arab militias roaming the provinces remain heavily armed and retain control over land they seized.

## **Macy's Thanksgiving parade returns, with all the trimmings**

By TED SHAFFREY and JENNIFER PELTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Giant balloons once again wafted through miles of Manhattan, wrangled by costumed handlers. High school and college marching bands from around the country were back, and so were the crowds at the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade.

After being crimped by the coronavirus pandemic last year, the holiday tradition returned in full Thursday, though with precautions.

"It really made Thanksgiving feel very festive and full of life," Sierra Guardiola, a 23-year-old interior design firm assistant, said after watching the spectacle in a turkey-shaped hat.

Thousands of marchers, hundreds of clowns, dozens of balloons and floats — and, of course, Santa Claus — marked the latest U.S. holiday event to make a comeback as vaccines, familiarity and sheer frustration made officials and some of the public more comfortable with big gatherings amid the ongoing pandemic.

To President Joe Biden, the parade's full-fledged return was a sign of renewal, and he called NBC broadcaster Al Roker on-air to say so.

"After two years, we're back. America is back. There's nothing we're unable to overcome," Biden said over the phone from Nantucket, Massachusetts, where he was watching the broadcast with his family.

Still, safety measures continued. Parade staffers and volunteers had to be vaccinated against COVID-19 and wear masks, though some singers and performers were allowed to shed them. There was no inocula-

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tion requirement for spectators, but Macy's and the city encouraged them to cover their faces.

Asahi Pompey said she made a point of getting her vaccine booster shot Wednesday and wore a mask while in the crowd, but COVID-19 concerns couldn't keep her away.

"It feels really phenomenal to be here. It feels like New York is on its way to recovery," said Pompey, 49, a lawyer.

"It's like the whole spirit of New York has come and gathered so we can be together," added her school-age son, Sebastian Pompey-Schoelkopf.

Last Thanksgiving, with no vaccines available and the virus beginning a winter surge in the nation's biggest city, the parade was confined to one block and sometimes pre-taped. Most performers were locally based, to cut down on travel, and the giant balloons were tethered to vehicles instead of being handled by volunteers. No spectators were allowed.

Getting to watch the nearly century-old parade this year on the street, instead of a screen, was "incredible" for Katie Koth. The 26-year-old teacher was at the event for the first time.

"The energy is crazy, and the crowd was amazing," she said.

The event came days after an SUV driver plowed through a Christmas parade in suburban Milwaukee, killing six people and injuring over 60. Authorities said the driver, who has been charged with intentional homicide, was speeding away from police after a domestic dispute.

Mayor Bill de Blasio said Wednesday there was no credible, specific threat to the Thanksgiving parade, but security was extensive, as usual. It involved thousands of police officers, as well as sand-filled garbage trucks and concrete barriers blocking cars from the parade route, bomb-detecting dogs, heavy-weapons teams, radiation and chemical sensors and over 300 extra cameras.

Inside the barricades, new balloon giants joined the lineup, including the title character from the Netflix series "Ada Twist, Scientist"; the Pokémon characters Pikachu and Eevee on a sled (Pikachu has appeared before, in different form), and Groggu, aka "Baby Yoda," from the television show "The Mandalorian." New floats came from entities ranging from condiment maker Heinz to NBCUniversal's Peacock streaming service to the Louisiana Office of Tourism.

Entertainers and celebrities included Carrie Underwood, Jon Batiste, Nelly, Kelly Rowland, Miss America Camille Schrier, the band Foreigner, and many others. Several Broadway musical casts and the Radio City Rockettes also performed.

Sloan Brown, 6, took it all in from a sidewalk and summed up the experience in a word: "Cool."

## 1,600 migrants lost at sea in Mediterranean this year

By KARL RITTER Associated Press

ROME (AP) — The sinking of a boat with more than 30 people on board this week is the deadliest migration tragedy to date in the English Channel.

Migrant shipwrecks of that scale, however, are not uncommon in the waters surrounding Europe's southern borders.

This year alone, U.N. officials estimate that 1,600 people have died or gone missing in the Mediterranean Sea, the main gateway to Europe for migrants trying to enter the continent with the help of human smugglers.

The death toll is higher than last year, but by no means unique. The International Organization of Migration estimates that 23,000 people have perished since 2014 while trying to cross the Mediterranean in rickety boats or rubber dinghies, peaking at more than 5,000 in 2016. In the same seven-year period, about 166 people have died in the English channel.

Just last week 85 people died in two separate incidents while trying to reach Italy from Libya, said Flavio di Giacomo, the IOM's spokesman in Italy. Those tragedies barely got noticed in Europe.

"I think it's a question of proximity," di Giacomo said. "I think the media attention of what happened between UK and France is also because this is new. Europe is not used to have that inside the continent; usually it's on the external borders."

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This year the busiest and deadliest migrant route to Europe is the central Mediterranean where people travel in crowded boats from Libya and Tunisia — and in some cases all the way from Turkey — toward Italy. About 60,000 people have arrived in Italy by sea this year, and some 1,200 have died or disappeared on the journey, according to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees.

The number of missing is an estimate partly based on information from survivors of shipwrecks.

Migrant rescue activists on Thursday said a boat in the central Mediterranean with 430 people on board was taking in water and called on European authorities to assist. Another boat operated by charity Sea-Watch was looking for a safe port to disembark 463 rescued migrants.

Meanwhile, since last year traffic has increased on an even more dangerous route in the Atlantic Ocean where migrants set out from Senegal, Mauritania or Morocco in simple wooden boats with the hope of reaching Spain's Canary Islands. Some boats sink not far from the coast of Africa and others disappear further out, in some cases missing the Canaries and drifting deep into the Atlantic.

"The route from western Africa is very long and very dangerous," di Giacomo said.

IOM has registered 900 deaths on the Canaries route this year, he said, but the true number could be double "and no one is paying a lot of attention."

More than 400 people were rescued this week while trying to reach the island group.

Human rights groups often criticize European governments for not doing more to rescue migrants trying to reach the continent on unseaworthy vessels. European rescue efforts led by Italy in the central Mediterranean were scaled back a few years ago and more emphasis was placed on training and equipping the Libyan coast guard to intercept migrant boats before they can reach European waters. Critics say Europe is turning a blind eye to human rights abuses in Libyan detention centers for migrants.

Noting that nine out of 10 refugees have fled to neighboring countries, Carlotta Sami of UNCHR in Italy said the agency is pushing for EU governments to provide "safe passageways" for refugees "to diminish the number of those who attempt to make the extremely risky journey."

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AP writer Lorne Cook in Brussels contributed to this report.

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## Mexico's drug war uses drones, human shields, gunships

By MARK STEVENSON Associated Press

AGUILILLA, Mexico (AP) — The Mexican government is rapidly running out of tools to control the expansion of the feared Jalisco cartel on the front lines of Mexico's narco war in the western state of Michoacan and the stalled ground effort is being supplemented by an increasingly sophisticated aerial conflict.

Jalisco, Mexico's most militarily powerful drug gang, has begun organizing townspeople to act as human shields against army troops, which now just try to keep rival cartels apart.

"If they try to come in here again, we'll put 2,000 people out here to stop them," said Habacuc Solorzano, a 39-year-old farmer who leads the civilian movement associated with the cartel. His statement, like most of what comes out of the Jalisco side, is not mere boasting: He already had about 500 local residents marching last week— then wading across a river — to confront an army squad blocking a dirt road leading out of Jalisco territory.

Residents of Aguililla are fed up with the army's strategy of simply separating the Jalisco and the Michoacan-based Viagras gang. The army policy effectively allows the Viagras — best known for kidnapping and extorting money — to set up roadblocks and checkpoints that have choked off all commerce with Aguililla. Limes and cattle heading out, or supplies heading in, must pay a war tax to the Viagras.

"We'd rather be killed by you than killed by those criminals!" one demonstrator shouted at soldiers during a tense, hour-long confrontation between demonstrators and a squad of a dozen troops who took cover behind a barricade of car tires. Many of the demonstrators carried rocks and powerful slingshots, but did not use them.

The residents want the army to either fight both cartels, or at least let the two gangs battle.



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"Let the two cartels fight it out and kill each other," another demonstrator shouted. "Jalisco is going to beat everybody!"

That view is widespread. "What we need is for one cartel to take control, stop the fighting and impose some semblance of calm," said a local priest. "Everything indicates that group is the Jalisco cartel."

Above all, what residents want is for the Viagras' checkpoints to be cleared and the road opened again. Because they must occasionally pass through those roadblocks, none of the residents wanted to give their names for fear of reprisals.

But one explained it this way to the army squad: "The only road into Aguililla is blocked and controlled by a cartel that is only 500 yards away from you, and you (the army) are not doing anything to protect our right to travel freely," he said. "You don't know how hard it is to be paying a war tax that is being used to kill us."

That is actually a fairly accurate description of government policy: preserving the status quo, and making each cartel stay in its own territory.

But Jalisco won't accept the government as arbiter of drug cartel territorial divisions; the local Jalisco cartel leader says the army is only trying to protect the weaker of the two gangs, the Viagras, for reasons of corruption.

Jalisco is everywhere in Aguililla, from pickups and homemade armored cars bearing the cartel's initials to the small trampolines the gang installed for children in every village.

Some residents say they are strongly pressured to participate in the protests, fearing their water or electricity might be cut off if they don't. Others are just tired of paying the Viagras' war taxes and being cut off from the outside world. One female protester described how her father died in early 2020 because the Viagras wouldn't allow them past to get to a hospital.

Dozens of cartel gunmen openly wear bulletproof vests emblazoned with the group's Spanish initials, "CJNG" — Jalisco New Generation Cartel — on the back, and on the front, "FEM" — "Mencho's Special Forces," a reference to the nickname of the cartel's leader, Nemesio Oseguera.

Jalisco is the one cartel in Mexico that doesn't hide what it is, and doesn't play to the politics of press relations or restraint.

"We're narcos," said the local Jalisco leader, who did not give his name. "Everybody should mind his own business." His beef with the Viagras and other local gangs he's fighting is that "they want everything for themselves."

Jalisco keeps its sizeable army of troops running with a potent mixture of money — the cartel has a lot, from trafficking fentanyl and meth into the United States — and cocaine, which it flies in from Costa Rica.

As the local boss stands at an impromptu street-side command post, a pickup full of Jalisco gunmen with AR15 assault rifles pulls up. The driver says, "The Scorpion said he needs some stuff," and the boss reaches into his own truck and hands the co-pilot a plastic bag with what appears to be a kilogram brick of cocaine, apparently for "the troops."

Jalisco understands brute force; for the moment, it doesn't bother Aguililla residents much, because it doesn't have to. But if it suspects a resident of actively working for or passing information to the Viagras, that person's life expectancy is likely to be very short.

The local boss shrugs off the government's assertions that cartels like Jalisco are having trouble finding young recruits, due to the current administration's youth employment and training programs.

"It depends on the kind of youth," he says. "Those that sleep under bridges, they come here and they think they're in Paris. There's food here."

"I make it clear to my people that they come here to fight," he adds.

Beyond food, regular pay and unlimited drugs, the Jalisco cartel also offers its young foot soldiers a kind of family structure. Everyone, even the local boss, refers to their immediate superior as "Apa," the way a child would say "Papa."

Both cartels have developed bomb-carrying drones, and the most feared warrior on these battlefields is the "dronero," or drone operator. While initially crude and dangerous to load and operate — and still

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worrisomely indiscriminate — drone warfare has improved, and it's not unusual to see metal barn or shed roofs opened like tin cans from the impact of drone explosions.

Locals also claim — though there is little evidence beyond a few craters in roads — that the cartels are starting to use land mines.

To handle the increasing firepower in the conflict, the Mexican government has resorted to playing a powerful card to outgun the Jalisco cartel: Blackhawk helicopter gunships equipped with rotating-barrel electric machine guns that can fire 6,000 rounds per minute.

It is a weapon that almost defines "indiscriminate blanket fire" and is banned in most countries in civil conflicts. It is the kind of weapon President Andrés Manuel López Obrador says he no longer wants.

But for the moment, such massive firepower is the only thing holding Jalisco back.

"They shot up and burned two of our trucks," the local gang boss said of the gunships. "When the soldiers arrive with a helicopter, there's nothing you can do, you just get out of the way."

It's not clear that is going to be the case for long. Jalisco is known for two things: being the most heavily armed cartel in Mexico, and the only one to have ever shot down a military helicopter.

In 2015, Jalisco cartel gunmen brought down a Eurocopter transport helicopter with a rocket-propelled grenade, killing eight soldiers and a police officer. While the choppers Jalisco faces now are Blackhawks, there is little doubt the cartel can come up with something punchier.

The newspaper El Universal published transcripts of intercepted cartel communications where a leader can be heard coaching a sniper with a .50-caliber rifle to put armor-piercing rounds through the door of a helicopter. The Mexican army did not respond to request for comment on this, or other issues.

In the past, Jalisco has obtained squad machine guns, .50-caliber sniper rifles and 40mm grenades and launchers.

The government, afraid of the kind of bloodbath that started in 2018 when the Jalisco cartel moved into the neighboring state of Guanajuato, is now left with an unworkable policy of defending gang territorial divisions, and an increasingly narrow military advantage.

An unnamed army captain who tried to talk with the Aguillilla protesters expressed the predicament.

"How can it be that Mexicans are killing other Mexicans?" the captain said. "This just can't be."

## **New maps spark debate over majority-minority districts**

By DAVID EGGERT and NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

DETROIT (AP) — Adam Hollier is a lieutenant in the Army Reserves, a paratrooper, Detroit native, a Democrat and a Black man. He is also a state senator who represents a majority-Black district that stretches across the northeastern edge of his economically battered and resilient hometown. That critical mass of Black voters, Hollier argues, ensures he has a chance to be elected and give voice to people who have long been ignored by the political system.

Rebecca Szetela is a lawyer who describes herself as an independent, and a white woman who chairs Michigan's new Independent Citizens Redistricting Commission. Its job is to redraw the lines of legislative seats to promote more partisan competition in a state where Republicans have dominated the Legislature for decades. One of the best ways to do that, and empower minority voters, Szetela and other commissioners argue, is putting some of the majority-Black neighborhoods in Hollier's district in other seats, where they may have more say over Michigan's leadership.

For Hollier's 2nd Senate District, that means some of its Detroit neighborhoods would be grafted on to mostly white districts, and his own seat would stretch across Eight Mile Road, the infamous boundary between Detroit and its first-ring, majority white suburbs. Its Black voting-age population would drop to 42%.

Hollier, like other Black lawmakers, is furious, saying that move jeopardizes Black elected officials. "By and large, Black people vote for Black people and white people vote for white people," Hollier said. "It's just the reality. It's got nothing to do with me. Draw maps that majority-Black communities can win."

Whether Hollier is right is at the heart of a heated debate over how to ensure racial and ethnic minority communities can elect the officeholders of their choice. The fight is complicated and wonky — like most

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surrounding the once-a-decade redistricting process. But the stakes are clear: Black, Latino and Asian Americans are underrepresented in state legislatures.

For decades, the widely accepted strategy was to group together Black voters so they comprised a majority in a statehouse or congressional district. That principle was enshrined in the federal Voting Rights Act, which requires the creation of districts with a majority or plurality of Black — or other minority racial or ethnic group — voters in places where the white population has a history of preventing them from electing their chosen representatives.

That strategy was reinforced by partisan politics. Republicans have been happy to draw districts with large numbers of Black voters because Black voters overwhelmingly favor Democrats. The effect was to pack Democrats into just a few districts and leave other parts of the state more safely Republican.

But politics has changed dramatically since the law was passed in 1965. Now, only 18 of the 53 members of the Congressional Black Caucus were elected in districts that are majority African American. Rising Black politicians like Rep. Antonio Delgado and Rep. Joe Neguse represent heavily white areas in New York's Hudson River Valley and Boulder, Colorado respectively.

"I think we're in a new age now," said Bakari Sellers, an African American former South Carolina state legislator. "If you're talented enough, you can win in a 30-35% Black district. ... We can be more competitive around the country."

But that's a hard sell to some lawmakers and advocates pushing to put more people of color in statehouses and Congress. Black legislators make up less than 10% of state legislators in the U.S., although 14.2% of the population is Black, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. Latinos are 18.7% of the population and just 5.3% of state lawmakers. Asians comprise 2% of legislators but 7.2% of the population.

In Nevada, Latino and other activist groups opposed maps drawn by the Democratic-controlled Legislature because the plan spread Latinos broadly around the state's congressional and legislative districts to increase the odds of Democratic victories. In Wisconsin, Democratic Gov. Tony Evers asked a commission to propose maps to counter ones drawn by the GOP-controlled Legislature. But Black and Latino Democrats objected to the commission's maps because they would scatter minority voters across several districts.

"I get what Republicans have done, completely, but I'm not willing to sacrifice Black representation and brown representation, I'm just not," said Sen. Lena Taylor, one of two African American Democrats in the Wisconsin state Senate, who voted against her party's map.

The other, Sen. LaTonya Johnson, disagreed, saying the Democratic plan was far better than the alternative: "I don't believe that the maps proposed would block Black candidates of choice, but I would rather have to fight harder for my seat than have my community suffer another 10 years under a Republican gerrymander."

The risks in balancing the racial composition of districts were illustrated in this month's Virginia elections. Two Black Democratic delegates narrowly lost their seats in districts that are still majority African American — but had recently been redrawn to have fewer Black voters. Control of the House of Delegates will come down to two other races that are in recounts.

Jonathan Cervas, one of the experts who redrew the Virginia districts in 2019, said the aim was to rectify what a court had found was discrimination against Black voters. He argued that the Voting Rights Act does not guarantee Black legislators will always be reelected. "The problem is the Democrats had a bad election," Cervas said.

Still, the shift toward unpacking districts is likely to lead to turnover in legislatures and Congress. In North Carolina, a new GOP-approved map cut the share of Black voters in Democratic Rep. G.K. Butterfield's district from 45% to 38%. The nine-term African American congressman announced his resignation this month and called the new map "racially gerrymandered."

At the other extreme, Democrats filed a lawsuit this month alleging that Alabama Republicans improperly packed Black voters into the state's 7th Congressional District, making it home to nearly one out of every three African Americans in the state.

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One quarter of Alabama's population is Black, but the 7th is the sole district represented by an African American in Congress, Rep. Terri Sewell. It is also the only Democratic-held district in the state. A more even distribution of Black voters, Democrats argue, might help them win a second.

Increasing competition is one of the goals of Michigan's commission, which voters created in 2018 after decades of partisan gerrymandering controlled by Republicans. The commission also is tasked with considering representation of minority communities and following the Voting Rights Act.

It is advancing maps that would cut the number of majority-Black districts from two to zero in Congress and from roughly a dozen to as few as three in the Legislature, pending final votes. Commissioners argue that there is evidence that Black candidates can still win elections. In 2020, for example, racial minorities won 19 of 20 legislative seats where Black people constitute at least 35% of the voting-age population.

"What we have done is taken those areas and divided them into multiple districts so that there's actually more districts where minority voters will be able to elect their candidates of choice, which should actually have the effect of increasing the representation among the African American community," Szetela said.

But Republicans and others, including the state's civil rights director, predict legal troubles ahead.

Jamie Roe, a GOP consultant tracking the redistricting process, noted Michigan has had two majority-Black congressional districts since at least the 1960s — whether drawn by legislators or courts.

"They have opened themselves terribly to a Voting Rights Act challenge," he said.

Riccardi reported from Denver.

## **EXPLAINER: Trio guilty of killing Ahmaud Arbery. What now?**

By KATE BRUMBACK Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — The killing was captured on video and shared around the world: Ahmaud Arbery running toward and then around an idling pickup truck before its driver blasted him at close range with a shotgun.

Soon after Travis McMichael fatally shot Arbery on Feb. 23, 2020, his father, Greg McMichael, told police how the pair had armed themselves, chased the young Black man and trapped him "like a rat." Neighbor William "Roddie" Bryan told officers he joined the pursuit and helped cut off Arbery's escape.

After a 13-day trial at the Glynn County courthouse in coastal Georgia, a disproportionately white jury found the three white men guilty of murder. Each man was also convicted on lesser charges.

**ON WHAT CHARGES WAS EACH MAN CONVICTED?**

A nine-count indictment charged all three men with one count of malice murder, four counts of felony murder, two counts of aggravated assault, one count of false imprisonment and one count of criminal attempt to commit a felony, in this case false imprisonment.

Travis McMichael was convicted of all nine charges. Greg McMichael was convicted of all charges except malice murder. Bryan was convicted of three counts of felony murder, one count of aggravated assault, one count of false imprisonment and one count of criminal attempt to commit a felony.

**HOW MUCH PRISON TIME ARE THEY FACING?**

Malice and felony murder convictions both carry a minimum penalty of life in prison. The judge decides whether that comes with or without the possibility of parole. Even if the possibility of parole is granted, a person convicted of murder must serve 30 years before becoming eligible. Multiple murder convictions are merged for the purposes of sentencing.

Murder can also be punishable by death in Georgia if the killing meets certain criteria and the prosecutor chooses to seek the death penalty. Prosecutors in this case did not.

Each count of aggravated assault carries a prison term of at least one year but not more than 20 years. False imprisonment is punishable by a sentence of one to 10 years in prison.

**WHEN WILL THEY BE SENTENCED?**

That's not clear yet. Superior Court Judge Timothy Walmsley will set a sentencing date.

**WILL THERE BE APPEALS?**

Appeals are almost certain in this case, said University of Georgia law professor emeritus Ron Carlson.



One likely basis for appeal could be the exclusion of certain evidence from the trial, he said. Defense attorneys had sought to introduce evidence of Arbery's criminal record, records on his mental health and the fact that he was on probation. They also wanted to have a use-of-force expert testify. But the judge ruled against admitting any of that evidence.

"They'll argue that relevant evidence helpful to the defense was excluded by the trial judge and that was an error," Carlson said.

It's also possible that appellate attorneys could find other grounds for appeal after scouring transcripts and jury instructions, and speaking with jurors.

Robert Rubin and Jason Sheffield, attorneys for Travis McMichael, said after the verdict that they plan to appeal. Sheffield said they had no second thoughts about trying the case in the community where Arbery was killed rather than seeking to move it elsewhere. But he said, "It could certainly become a part of the appeal."

**AREN'T THERE STILL FEDERAL CHARGES PENDING?**

Yes. The McMichaels and Bryan still face federal charges.

Months before the three stood trial on state murder charges, a federal grand jury in April indicted them on hate crimes charges. It's an entirely separate case that's not affected by the state trial's outcome.

U.S. District Court Judge Lisa Godbey Wood has scheduled jury selection in the federal trial to start Feb. 7. All three men are charged with one count of interference with civil rights and attempted kidnapping. The McMichaels were also charged with using, carrying and brandishing a firearm during a crime of violence.

The federal indictment says the men targeted Arbery because he was Black.

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This story was first published on November 24, 2021. It was updated on November 25, 2021 to correct that William "Roddie" Bryan was convicted on three counts of felony murder, not two.

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Associated Press writer Russ Bynum in Brunswick, Georgia, contributed to this report. Find all of the AP's coverage of the case: <https://apnews.com/hub/ahmaud-arbery>

## **Lifting obstacles: France helps women report abuse to police**

By MASHA MACPHERSON and SYLVIE CORBET Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — France is launching a new process for women to formally report domestic violence and sexual and other abuse, circumventing police stations where many victims feel uncomfortable filing such complaints.

The measure comes after tens of thousands of women in France shared testimonies online about police victim-blaming them or mishandling complaints as they reported sexual abuse. The government has also come under pressure in recent years to better protect women from deadly domestic violence.

Junior Interior Minister Marlene Schiappa said alternative locations for filing police complaints can include a friend's home or some other place where abused women feel safe.

"There are women who tell us that they don't dare to come to a police station because they are afraid of not being welcomed, because it's hard to talk about things that are taboo (with) an unknown person in uniform in a foreign environment," she said in an interview with The Associated Press. "That's why we are lifting one after the other, the obstacles they are facing."

An annual survey led by national statistics institute INSEE found that only 10% of victims of sexual abuse in France file a formal complaint.

And police this week reported a 10% increase in reports of domestic violence last year. It is estimated that more than 200,000 women each year are physically or sexually abused by their partner or ex-partner, according to INSEE.

The latest government initiative will try sending police officers where women have found shelter so that they can file formal complaints. This will allow victims to stay "in an environment where you feel safe, at a friend's house, at your lawyer's house, at the hospital, at your doctor's house," Schiappa said.

This comes in addition to other efforts made in recent years, including training more police officers,

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creating a list of questions asked to assess danger, and the possibility to alert police by text message or an internet platform, she added.

The junior minister is in charge of supervising relations between police and female victims of violence. On Tuesday, she visited a renovated police station in Paris' 13th arrondissement, now including an office providing privacy for those filing complaints, and a room dedicated to children, with toys and books.

The visit was part of other events this week aimed at marking Thursday's International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women.

European lawmakers called Thursday for binding rules across the 27-nation EU to better protect women, noting that one in three women in the bloc experiences sexual or other physical violence in her lifetime, and that half of women murdered in the EU are killed by someone close to them.

In France, the new process of filing complaints is being rolled out in select regions around the country for now with the aim to make it nationwide.

The measure comes after a viral campaign on French social media denounced the shocking response of some police officers as they reported sexual abuse. The hashtag #DoublePeine (#DoubleSentencing) rapidly counted at least 30,000 accounts of alleged mistreatment by police, according to activists.

"I want to value and support the action of the police forces ... and to remind everyone once again that in the vast majority of cases, complaints are handled with a lot of empathy, a lot of support," Schiappa said. "But for the minority of cases in which it goes badly, it is obviously inadmissible."

The Interior Ministry in recent months sent instructions to police about the legal obligation to accept all complaints, following accounts by women saying they had been discouraged by officers from reporting abuse — sometimes with the argument of insufficient evidence.

"Refusing to receive a complaint is illegal," Schiappa said. "We want the complaints to be forwarded to the public prosecutor's office so that the justice system can take it over."

Axelle Garnier de Saint Sauveur, a psychologist working with Paris police to help take care of victims and train officers, said there are a series of obstacles to women reporting abuse.

When their partner has a hold on them, it "blocks everything. It prevents (them) from going towards protection, file a complaint," she said. "You also have the fact that traumatic situations completely hinder the victim's ability to think."

Another reason is that "there is surely a part of fear, of ignorance about what to do when you are abused. How are you going to be treated" when filing a complaint.

"That is scary (for the victim) to think: 'I'm not going to be heard, I'm not going to be welcome'. And then there is the obstacle to overcome: enter a police station."

On Saturday, tens of thousands of people marched through Paris and other cities to demand more government action on the issue. "We recalled that violence is everywhere. That it is not unavoidable," women's right group NousToutes tweeted.

Activists want the government to dedicate 1 billion euros (\$1.1 billion) each year to fight violence against women, instead of the 360 million (\$406 million) spent now — in part to create more shelters.

## Who's a hero? Some states, cities still debating hazard pay

By SUSAN HAIGH Associated Press

HARTFORD, Conn. (AP) — When the U.S. government allowed so-called hero pay for frontline workers as a possible use of pandemic relief money, it suggested occupations that could be eligible from farm workers and childcare staff to janitors and truck drivers.

State and local governments have struggled to determine who among the many workers who braved the raging coronavirus pandemic before vaccines became available should qualify: Only government workers, or private employees, too? Should it go to a small pool of essential workers like nurses or be spread around to others, including grocery store workers?

"It's a bad position for us to be in because you have your local government trying to pick winners and losers, if you would, or recipients and nonrecipients. And hence by default, you're saying importance versus

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not important," said Jason Levesque, the Republican mayor of Auburn, Maine, where officials have not yet decided who will receive hazard pay from the city's American Rescue Plan funds.

A year and a half into the pandemic, such decisions have taken on political implications for some leaders as unions lobby for expanded eligibility, with workers who end up being left out feeling embittered.

"It sounds like it's about the money, but this is a token of appreciation," said Ginny Ligi, a correctional officer who contracted COVID-19 last year in Connecticut, where the bonus checks have yet to cut amid negotiations with unions. "It's so hard to put into words the actual feeling of what it was like to walk into that place every day, day in, day out. It scarred us. It really did."

Interim federal rules published six months ago allow state and local COVID-19 recovery funds to be spent on premium pay for essential workers of up to \$13 per hour, in addition to their regular wages. The amount cannot exceed \$25,000 per employee.

The rules also allow grants to be provided to third-party employers with eligible workers, who are defined as someone who has had "regular in-person interactions or regular physical handling of items that were also handled by others" or a heightened risk of exposure to COVID-19.

The rules encourage state and local governments to "prioritize providing retrospective premium pay where possible, recognizing that many essential workers have not yet received additional compensation for work conducted over the course of many months," while also prioritizing lower income eligible workers.

As of July, about a third of U.S. states had used federal COVID-19 relief aid to reward workers considered essential with bonuses, although who qualified and how much they received varied widely, according to an Associated Press review.

A list of hazard and premium pay state allocations as of Nov. 18, provided by the National Conference of State Legislatures, shows funds have typically been set aside for government workers, such as state troopers and correctional officers.

In Minnesota, lawmakers still have \$250 million in aid set aside for hero pay, but they've been struggling with how to distribute it. A special committee was unable to come up with a compromise plan, instead sending two competing recommendations to the full legislature for consideration.

"I think every time we take another week, we're just delaying the whole process and I think the fastest way is to get them over to the Legislature," said Republican state Sen. Mary Kiffmeyer, a member of the committee, during a meeting last month.

Minnesota Senate Republicans want to offer a tax-free bonus of \$1,200 to about 200,000 workers who they say took on the greatest risk, such as nurses, long-term care workers, prison staff and first responders.

But House Democrats want to spread the money more widely, providing roughly \$375 to about 670,000 essential workers, including low-wage food service and grocery store employees, security guards, janitors and others.

Earlier this week, after it appeared that a political impasse was easing over another issue, Democratic House Speaker Melissa Hortman told Minnesota Public Radio that she believed an agreement can be reached on front-line worker pay, noting there's a "pretty natural middle ground" between the dueling proposals.

Connecticut has yet to pay out any of the \$20 million in federal pandemic money set aside by state lawmakers in June for essential state employees and members of the Connecticut National Guard.

As negotiations continue with union leaders, the Connecticut AFL-CIO labor organization has stepped up pressure on Democratic Gov. Ned Lamont, who is up for reelection in 2022, to provide \$1 an hour in hazard pay to all public and private sector essential workers who worked during the pandemic before vaccinations became available.

"The governor needs to reevaluate his priorities and show that these workers who put themselves and their lives at risk are a top priority. I think it's really the least he can do for these workers," said Ed Hawthorne, president of the Connecticut AFL-CIO. "These workers showed up for Connecticut. It's time to governor to show up for them."

Max Reiss, Lamont's spokesperson, said the figures cited by organized labor are "just not feasible."

In the meantime, he said, the administration is in negotiations with state employee unions, classifying

the work state employees did during the pandemic and determining whether they may have shifted to other responsibilities that were more or less risky, which could also affect whether they receive more or less money.

"We want to recognize the workers who kept going into work every day because they had to and there was not a choice. And those range from people working in state-run health care facilities to people who needed to plow our roads during severe weather and work in-person jobs," he said. "The next piece is that you have to come up with the determination as to who all those people were. And there's a verification process to that."

In some states like California, cities are in the process of determining how to fairly distribute some of their federal funds to help essential private sector workers who may not have received extra pay from their employers.

Rachel Torres, deputy of the political and civil rights department at United Food and Commercial Workers Union, Local 770, said her union is urging cities to follow the lead of Oxnard and Calabasas, which voted this year to provide grocery and drug store workers with payments of as much as \$1,000.

"It really should not be a competition among essential workforces. There should be moneys available for many workers," Torres said.

David Dobbs and his fellow firefighters in Bridgeport, Connecticut, are upset their city has yet to provide them with a share of the \$110 million it received in federal pandemic funds. Mayor Joe Gamin, a Democrat, said in a statement that he supports the concept of premium pay but that the matter is still being reviewed to make sure any payments comply with federal rules.

"We've demonstrated a commitment to this partnership. And I think we feel a little betrayed by the city right now, when when they're not dealing with us, when they came into this windfall," said Dobbs, president of the Bridgeport Firefighters Association, which gave up pay raises in the past when the city's budget was tight. "Imagine loaning your friends a decent amount of money and then hitting the Powerball and not making things right."

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Associated Press writer Steve Karnowski in Minneapolis contributed to this report.

## **EU regulator authorizes Pfizer's COVID vaccine for kids 5-11**

By MIKE CORDER and MARIA CHENG Associated Press

THE HAGUE, Netherlands (AP) — The European Union's drug regulator on Thursday authorized Pfizer's coronavirus vaccine for use on children from 5 to 11 years old, clearing the way for shots to be administered to millions of elementary school pupils amid a new wave of infections sweeping across the continent.

It is the first time the European Medicines Agency has cleared a COVID-19 vaccine for use in young children.

The agency said it "recommended granting an extension of indication for the COVID-19 vaccine Comirnaty to include use in children aged 5 to 11."

After evaluating a study of the vaccine in more than 2,000 children, the EMA estimated that the vaccine was about 90% effective in preventing symptomatic COVID-19 in young children and said the most common side effects were pain at the injection site, headaches, muscle pain and chills. The agency said the two-dose regimen should be given to children three weeks apart.

At least one country facing spiking infections didn't wait for the EMA approval. Authorities in the Austrian capital, Vienna, already have begun vaccinating the 5 to 11 age group. Europe is currently at the epicenter of the pandemic and the World Health Organization has warned the continent could see deaths top 2 million by the spring unless urgent measures are taken.

The EMA green light for the vaccine developed by Pfizer and German company BioNTech has to be rubber-stamped by the EU's executive branch, the European Commission, before health authorities in member states can begin administering shots.

Earlier this week, Germany's health minister Jens Spahn said shipping of vaccines for younger children



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in the EU would begin on Dec. 20.

The United States signed off on Pfizer's kids-sized shots earlier this month, followed by other countries including Canada.

Pfizer tested a dose that is a third of the amount given to adults for elementary school-age children. Even with the smaller shot, children who are 5 to 11 years old developed coronavirus-fighting antibody levels just as strong as teenagers and young adults getting the regular-strength shots, Dr. Bill Gruber, a Pfizer senior vice president, told The Associated Press in September.

But the studies done on Pfizer's vaccine in children haven't been big enough to detect any rare side effects from the second dose, like the chest and heart inflammation that has been seen in mostly male older teens and young adults.

American officials noted that COVID-19 has caused more deaths in children in the 5 to 11 age group than some other diseases, such as chickenpox, did before children were routinely vaccinated.

Earlier this month, the EMA said it began evaluating the use of Moderna Inc.'s COVID-19 vaccine for children ages 6 to 11; it estimated that a decision would be made within two months.

Although children mostly only get mild symptoms of COVID-19, some public health experts believe immunizing them should be a priority to reduce the virus' continued spread, which could theoretically lead to the emergence of a dangerous new variant.

Researchers disagree on how much kids have influenced the course of the pandemic. Early research suggested they didn't contribute much to viral spread. But some experts say children played a significant role this year spreading contagious variants such as alpha and delta.

In a statement this week, WHO said that because children and teens tend to have milder COVID-19 disease than adults, "it is less urgent to vaccinate them than older people, those with chronic health conditions and health workers."

It has appealed to rich countries to stop immunizing children and asked them to donate their doses immediately to poor countries who have yet to give a first vaccine dose to their health workers and vulnerable populations.

Still, WHO acknowledged that there are benefits to vaccinating children and adolescents that go beyond the immediate health benefits.

"Vaccination that decreases COVID transmission in this age group may reduce transmission from children and adolescents to older adults, and may help reduce the need for mitigation measures in schools," WHO said.

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Maria Cheng reported from London.

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

## Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, Nov. 26, the 330th day of 2021. There are 35 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Nov. 26, 1941, U.S. Secretary of State Cordell Hull delivered a note to Japan's ambassador to the United States, Kichisaburo Nomura (kee-chee-sah-boor-oh noh-moo-rah), setting forth U.S. demands for "lasting and extensive peace throughout the Pacific area." The same day, a Japanese naval task force consisting of six aircraft carriers left the Kuril Islands, headed toward Hawaii.

On this date:

In 1825, the first college social fraternity, the Kappa Alpha Society, was formed at Union College in Schenectady, New York.

In 1864, English mathematician and writer Charles Dodgson presented a handwritten and illustrated manu-

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script, "Alice's Adventures Under Ground," to his 12-year-old friend Alice Pleasance Liddell; the book was later turned into "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland," published under Dodgson's pen name, Lewis Carroll.

In 1883, former slave and abolitionist Sojourner Truth died in Battle Creek, Michigan.

In 1917, the National Hockey League was founded in Montreal, succeeding the National Hockey Association.

In 1933, a judge in New York ruled the James Joyce book "Ulysses" was not obscene and could be published in the United States.

In 1943, during World War II, the HMT Rohna, a British transport ship carrying American soldiers, was hit by a German missile off Algeria; 1,138 men were killed.

In 1950, China entered the Korean War, launching a counteroffensive against soldiers from the United Nations, the U.S. and South Korea.

In 1973, President Richard Nixon's personal secretary, Rose Mary Woods, told a federal court that she'd accidentally caused part of the 18-1/2-minute gap in a key Watergate tape.

In 1986, President Ronald Reagan appointed a commission headed by former Sen. John Tower to investigate his National Security Council staff in the wake of the Iran-Contra affair.

In 1990, Japanese business giant Matsushita (mat-soosh-tah) Electric Industrial Co. agreed to acquire MCA Corp., owner of Universal Studios, for \$6.6 billion.

In 2000, Florida Secretary of State Katherine Harris certified George W. Bush the winner over Al Gore in the state's presidential balloting by a 537-vote margin.

In 2008, teams of heavily armed Pakistani gunmen stormed luxury hotels, a popular tourist attraction and a crowded train station in Mumbai, India, leaving at least 166 people dead in a rampage lasting some 60 hours.

Ten years ago: In a friendly-fire incident that further strained relations between the United States and Pakistan, U.S. forces launched airstrikes that mistakenly killed 24 Pakistani troops at two posts along the Afghan border. NASA's Curiosity rover blasted off from the Kennedy Space Center on an 8 1/2-month, 354 million-mile journey to Mars (it arrived in August 2012). NBA players and owners reached a tentative agreement to end a 149-day lockout.

Five years ago: Cuba said it would observe nine days of mourning for Fidel Castro, including a three-day journey by his ashes along the route taken by the rebel army he'd led on a victorious march across the island in 1959. Tony Award-winning character actor Fritz Weaver died in New York at age 90.

One year ago: Taking questions from reporters for the first time since the election, President Donald Trump acknowledged that he would leave the White House if Democrat Joe Biden's win was affirmed by the Electoral College; Trump also unleashed another round of complaints about the vote. Americans marked the Thanksgiving holiday amid the coronavirus pandemic, with many celebrations canceled or reduced; Zoom and FaceTime calls connected some families with those who didn't want to travel. With public health officials begging Americans not to travel, the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade was scaled back and aimed at a television audience instead of live crowds.

Today's Birthdays: Impressionist Rich Little is 83. Singer Tina Turner is 82. Singer Jean Terrell is 77. Pop musician John McVie is 76. Actor Marianne Muellerleile is 73. Actor Scott Jacoby is 65. Actor Jamie Rose is 62. Country singer Linda Davis is 59. Actor Scott Adsit is 56. Blues singer-musician Bernard Allison is 56. Country singer-musician Steve Grisaffe is 56. Actor Kristin Bauer is 55. Actor Peter Facinelli is 48. Actor Tammy Lynn Michaels Etheridge is 47. DJ/record label executive DJ Khaled (KAL'-ehd) is 46. Actor Maia (MY'-ah) Campbell is 45. Country singer Joe Nichols is 45. Contemporary Christian musicians Anthony and Randy Armstrong (Red) are 43. Actor Jessica Bowman is 41. Pop singer Natasha Bedingfield is 40. Actor Jessica Camacho is 39. Rock musician Ben Wysocki (The Fray) is 37. Singer Lil Fizz is 36. MLB All-Star Matt Carpenter is 36. Actor-singer-TV personality Rita Ora is 31. Actor/singer Aubrey Peebles is 28.