

Groton Daily Independent

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UpComing Events

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



"Self-esteem comes from being able to define the world in your own terms and refusing to abide by the judgements of others."

-Oprah Winfrey

JH GBB hosts Langford. 7th at 6 p.m. with 8th to follow

Tuesday, Dec. 7

GBB hosts Flandreau Indian. Varsity only at 6 p.m. 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

Saturday, Dec. 11

8 a.m. to Noon: ACT testing at GHS

10 a.m.: Wrestling Tourney at LaMoure

Boys Basketball at Britton-Hecla. JV at 1:30 p.m. followed by varsity game.

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

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

Sandy Strom and Steve Dresbach were united in marriage on November 11, 2021, at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Lawrence, Kan. Steve, a former Groton graduate, recently sold his home in Lawrence and returned to Groton, where the couple now resides.

Groton Garden Club

The Groton Garden Club met November 15, 2021, at the Groton Community Center with Elda Stange and Eunice McColister hosting. Pledges were recited in unison. Nine members answered roll call with "What they were thankful for."

A sign was made for the city park with the names of the three Groton ladies who were the state president of the South Dakota Federation of Garden Clubs. It will be installed in the park next spring.

Linda Gengerke will host the Christmas party, December 20, 6:30 p.m. with a potluck supper.

Laurie Mitchell gave the program on "Texas Hill Country."

Gov. Noem to Deliver 2021 Budget Address on Tuesday

PIERRE, S.D. – On Tuesday, December 7, Governor Kristi Noem will deliver the 2021 Budget Address, updating the people of South Dakota on budget plans for the remainder of Fiscal Year 2022 and Fiscal Year 2023.

The address will take place at 1pm CT/12pm MT in the South Dakota House of Representatives. The address will be livestreamed on South Dakota Public Broadcasting, SD.net, and Facebook.com/GovNoem.

Conde National League

Nov. 29 Team Standings: Mets 33, Cubs 26, Pirates 25, Tigers 23, Braves 19, Giants 18

Men's High Games: Ryan Bethke 214, Tony Waage 188, Joe Greblinhoff 171

Men's High Series: Chad Furney 485, Ryan Bethke 475, Tony Waage 475, Russ Bethke 448

Women's High Games: Nancy Radke 208, Michelle Johnson 179, Vickie Kramp 178

Women's High Series: Nancy Radke 457, Vickie Kramp 457, Michelle Johnson 455, Joyce Walter 434

South Dakota Ranked Top-5 in "Freedom in the 50 States"

PIERRE, S.D. – Today, the CATO Institute announced that South Dakota is now ranked in the top-five states in their "Freedom in the 50 States" index. The index ranks South Dakota as the most-improved state in the nation when comparing 2018 to 2019, Governor Noem's first year in office. The most recent edition, published in 2018, ranked South Dakota eighth. Governor Noem issued the following statement celebrating South Dakota's success:

"South Dakota has freedom in abundance. In the few short years since I took office as governor, we've already propelled South Dakota from a top-10 freest state status to a top-five status. I believe that we respect freedom more than any state in America, but this ranking indicates that we have more work to do. I look forward to working with the legislature to advance policies that protect freedom, cut red tape, and promote continual growth for our state."

The rankings are based on state laws as of January 1, 2020 and state budgets through FY 2020. Of note, this ranking did not take COVID-19 response into account. In the early months of the pandemic, Governor Noem was the only governor in America to never order a single business or church to close.

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H E L P

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Avantara-Groton is rapidly growing its team and hoping to invest in cook, dietary aides and Dietary Manager. Full and part time with after school hours available. Competitive wages, sign-on bonus, etc. Call Shana or Sarah to discuss your future employment opportunities today!

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*Olive Grove's
5th Annual*

*Christmas
Tour of Homes
& Holiday
Party*

**Weston & Emily Dinger
Cassels House Inn & Events
Julie Schaller (3 of Life)
Wage Memorial Library & City Office
Olde Bank N Café B & B**

**SATURDAY,
DEC. 4, 2021**

**TOUR OF
HOMES
4-7 P.M.**

**HOLIDAY
PARTY**

4-CLOSE

**Silent Basket Items
Bidding closes at 8:30 p.m.
Live Auction begins at 8:30 p.m.**

Coffee, Apple Cider and Goodies at the Club House
A variety of snacks served.

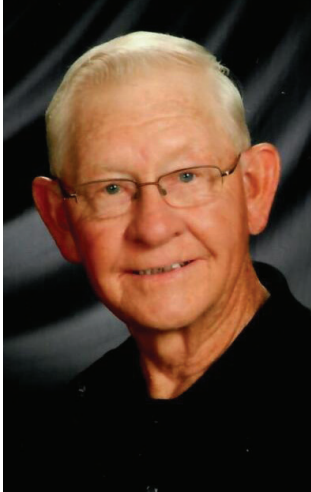
**\$15 tickets available at
Lori's Pharmacy, Groton
Groton Ford**

Hair & Company, Aberdeen

Come on out for a fun evening!

Support your local golf course!

The Life of Carroll "Spike" Nehls



Funeral services for Carroll "Spike" Nehls, 86, of Groton will be 10:30 a.m., Thursday, December 2nd at St. John's Lutheran Church. Rev. Larry Johnson and Pastor Craig Grams will officiate. Burial with military honors will follow in Groton Union Cemetery under the direction of Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel, Groton.

Visitation will be held for one hour prior to services at the church. There will be no prayer service.

Spike passed away November 27, 2021 at his home in Groton.

Carroll Lee Nehls was born on October 12, 1935 near Andover to Fred and Dora (Hoops) Nehls. He was baptized and confirmed at St. John's Lutheran Church. Spike attended school in Groton and graduated in 1953. Throughout school, he was involved in many sports and held a track record for many years. Spike enlisted in the US Marines and upon his honorable discharge returned to South Dakota. He continued his education at SDSU and later at Northern State University. On July 15, 1961, he was united in marriage with Helen Patricia "Pat" Vig in Claire City, SD.

Spike worked construction and later began his own business. Spike had a passion for hunting and fishing. He loved the sport of baseball and played for Groton

for many years. Spike's wife, Pat, also loved baseball and fell in love with one special player (Spike). He liked all sports and hardly missed any home games whether baseball, basketball, football or track.

Celebrating his life is his wife, Pat of Groton, sons, Scott (Susan) Nehls of Tucson, Arizona, Lance (Arlene) Nehls of Tucson, Arizona, four grandchildren, Alexa Brown, Lacey (Isaak) Matzdorff, Logan Nehls, Brock Nehls and his brother, Maurice Nehls of Langford.

Preceding him in death were his parents and six siblings.

Honorary Casketbearers will be his four Grandchildren.

Casketbearers will be Dennis Flihs, Dick Donovan, Dale Grenz, Lance Hawkins, Ken Zens, Lynn Vig, Brad Elliott, Paul Price, Troy Larson and Mike Nehls.

The service of
Carroll "Spike" Nehls
Thursday, Dec. 2, 10:30 a.m.
St. John's Lutheran Church
Groton

A graphic featuring three lit candles of varying heights on the left side, casting a warm glow. On the right side, there is a black and white portrait of the same elderly man from the article. The background is dark.

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From left to right: Gretchen Dinger (Flute), Rease Jandel (Bass Clarinet), Carter Barse (Alto Saxophone). (Courtesy Photo)

Three to be in North Area Honor Band

The 30th Annual South Dakota North Area Honor Band will present their concert on Saturday, December 4, 2021 at 4:00PM at the Johnson Fine Arts Center on the campus of Northern State University. Dr. Rolf Olson, director of Bands, Professor of Trumpet, and Chair of the Music Department at Northern State University, is the director for this year's event.

Representing twenty-eight schools, approximately one hundred students have been selected to participate in the Honor Band. Participating schools are Aberdeen Central, Aberdeen Christian, Aberdeen Roncalli, Clark, Eureka, Gettysburg, Great Plains Lutheran, Groton Area, Herried, Hoven, Howard, Huron, Ipswich, Langford, Leola, Milbank, Northwestern, Selby Area, Sully Buttes, Summit, Warner, and Wilmot.

Three Groton Area students will be participating in this event. They are Gretchen Dinger (flute), Rease Jandel (Bass Clarinet), and Carter Barse (Alto Saxophone).

Admission prices for the concert are \$5 for adults and \$3 for students, grades 1-12.

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Short Cuts are available from midnight Sunday ET through midnight Wednesday ET via the NFL SUNDAY TICKET App. For full Mix Channel and interactive functionality, HD equipment model HHR 21 or later is required. NFL, the NFL shield design and the NFL SUNDAY TICKET name and logo are registered trademarks of the NFL and its affiliates. NFL team names and uniform designs are registered trademarks of the teams indicated. Programming, pricing, promotions, restrictions & terms subject to change & may be modified, discontinued or terminated at any time without notice. Offers may not be combined with other promotional offers on the same services and may be modified or discontinued at any time without notice. Other conditions apply to all offers. HBO Max: Access HBO Max through HBO Max app or hbo.com with your DIRECTV log-in credentials. Compatible device or browser required. Use of HBO Max is subject to its own terms and conditions. See hbo.com/terms-of-use for details. 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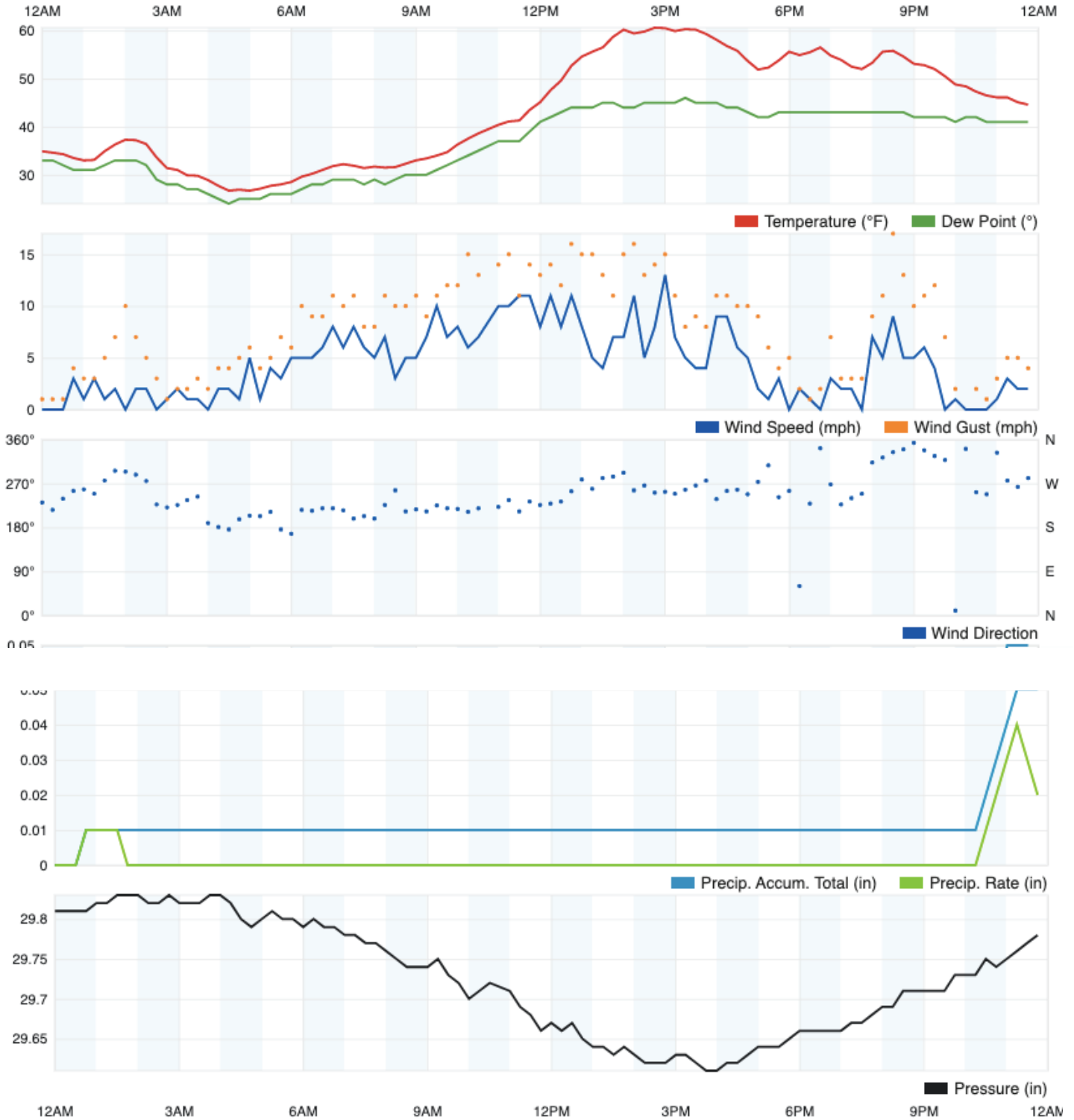
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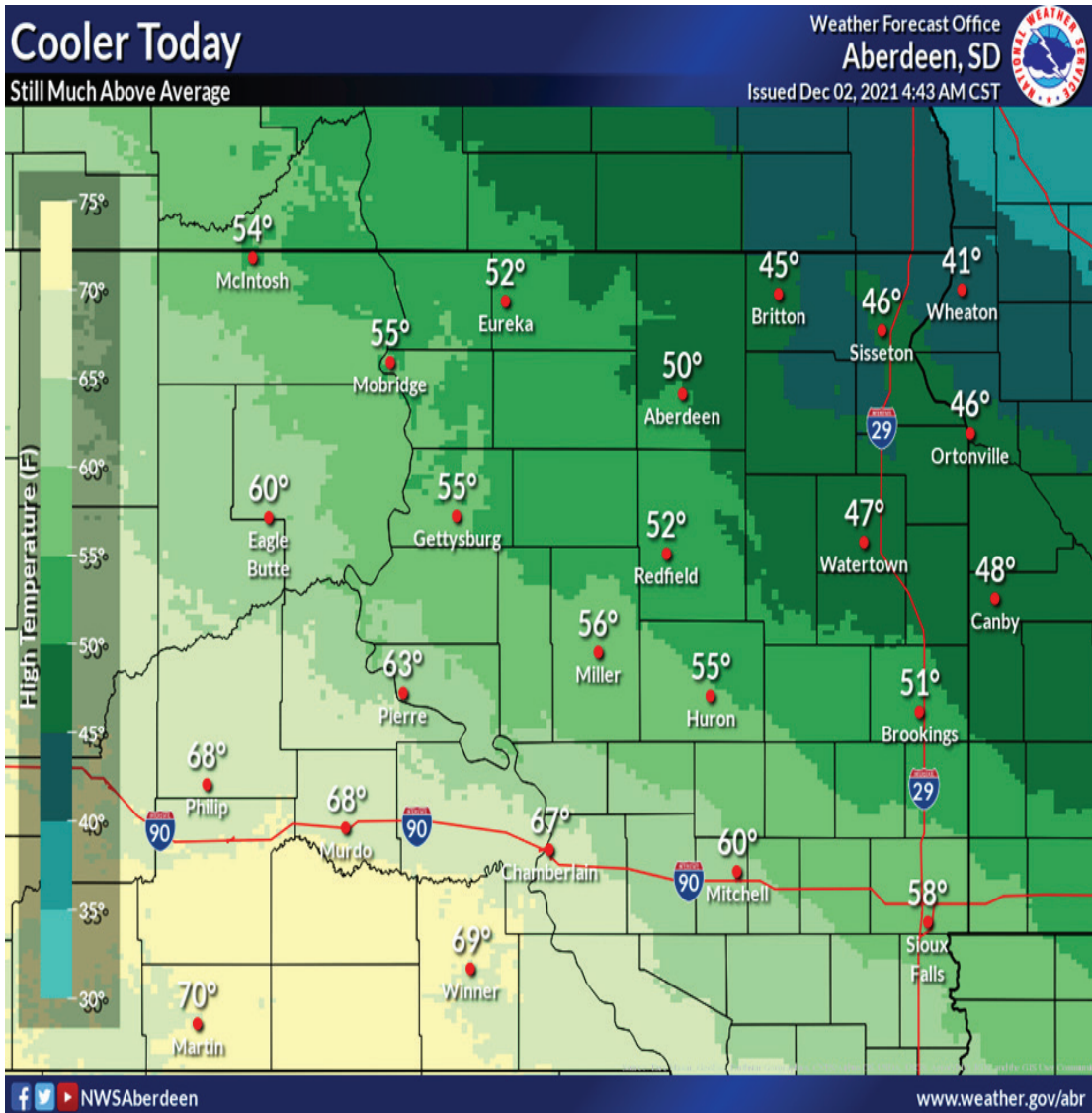
Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Friday	Friday Night	Saturday
				
Partly Sunny	Decreasing Clouds	Sunny	Increasing Clouds	Mostly Cloudy
High: 49 °F	Low: 29 °F	High: 41 °F	Low: 24 °F	High: 41 °F



High temperatures today will range from the lower 40s, in western Minnesota, to the mid-60s, in south-central South Dakota. Highs in the 40s can be expected on Friday.

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Record Warmth!

highs around 20-35° above average

Wed, Dec. 1st

	WHAT WE GOT TO	Record
Aberdeen	65	<i>new</i> 62 /1969
Watertown	54	59 /1998
Pierre	71	77 /1998
Mobridge	71	<i>new</i> 66 /1998
Sisseton	62	<i>new</i> 61 /1969

Mobridge's high temperature also sets a new all time record high for the month of December!



National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
U.S. Department of Commerce

National Weather Service
Aberdeen South Dakota

The month of December kicked off on a warm note. In fact, a few new record highs were set across the area. Daytime readings across the region were 20-35 degrees above normal for Dec. 1st. Cooler temperatures will return for the rest of the week, but those readings will still be above normal for this time of year.

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Today in Weather History

December 2, 1978: A low-pressure system moved northeast from Kansas, causing snow to fall over southern Minnesota south of a line from Alexandria to Duluth on the 2nd and 3rd, with the heaviest snow falling from west-central and southwest Minnesota to west-central Wisconsin. Snow depths of six inches or more fell in southwestern Minnesota, with 10 inches or more at Marshall, MN. Winds averaged near 20 mph, and temperatures ranged from 5 to 15 degrees above zero while the snow fell, but the snow did not cause extensive problems for the area. Wheaton had 2 inches, Artichoke Lake and Browns Valley had 3 inches.

December 2, 1984: Snow fell in the central and northeast parts of South Dakota from the late afternoon of the 1st to the morning of the 2nd, with amounts ranging from 3 to 10 inches. The most substantial amounts were in the northeast part of the state, with Day County reporting 8 to 10 inches. Five inches of snow fell at Clear Lake; six inches fell at Waubay, Clark, Miller, and 12 miles southwest of Harrold with 7 inches at Redfield.

1896 - An early season snow and ice storm struck the southeastern U.S. It produced 11 inches of snow at Charlotte NC, and six inches at Atlanta GA. (David Ludlum)

1925 - A late season hurricane caused extensive damage across the Florida peninsula, then moved off the Georgia coast crossing Cape Hatteras as a tropical storm. The storm produced whole gales along the Middle Atlantic and Southern New England coast. Winds gusted to 60 mph at Block Island RI, and reached 64 mph at Atlantic City NJ. (David Ludlum)

1950 - A late season tornado killed four persons in Madison County and Bond County, east of St Louis MO. Three tornadoes touched down in Illinois that afternoon, compared to just half a dozen tornadoes in the month of December in 115 years of records up until that time. Thunderstorms also produced hail which caused more than four million dollars damage in the St Louis area, it was the most damaging hailstorm of record for Missouri. (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1959: Between November 19 and December 2, an estimated 20 inches of rain fell near Frejus on the French Riviera. The rain caused the Malpasset Dam to collapse, which sent a 130-foot high wall of water into the towns of Malpasset and Bozon. The wall of water 10 feet tall reached Frejus, flooding the western half of the city. The dam breach killed 423 people and caused \$68 million in damages.

1968: The "Sacramento," a 250-foot fishing barge and former ferry between San Francisco and Oakland, succumb to a winter storm off Redondo Beach.

1970 - A tornado, 400 yards in width, touched down about one mile below the summit of Timpanogos Divide. Trees up to 18 inches in diameter were snapped, and some of the 38 inch snow cover was carried 1000 feet above the ground as the tornado traveled one mile. (The Weather Channel)

1982 - A tornado destroyed a home four miles south of Eastwood MO. The owners were not injured in that tornado, but ironically one was killed Christmas Eve when another tornado hit the replacement mobile home on the same site. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A powerful storm over the Gulf of Alaska continued to produced high winds and heavy rain along the northern and central Pacific coast. Winds gusted to 80 mph south of Port Orford OR, Stevens Pass WA was blanketed with sixteen inches of snow, and Blue Canyon CA was soaked with 1.63 inches of rain. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Squalls in the Great Lakes Region produced ten inches of snow at Union City, PA. Gale force winds gusted to 55 mph at Buffalo NY. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Squalls produced heavy snow in the Great Lakes Region. Totals in Upper Michigan ranged up to 20 inches at Ironwood. Heavy snow and high winds caused 150 auto accidents in Michigan, resulting in sixteen deaths and 22 injuries. Strong northwesterly winds gusted to 73 mph at Johnstown PA, and Lowville PA received 20 inches of snow in 36 hours. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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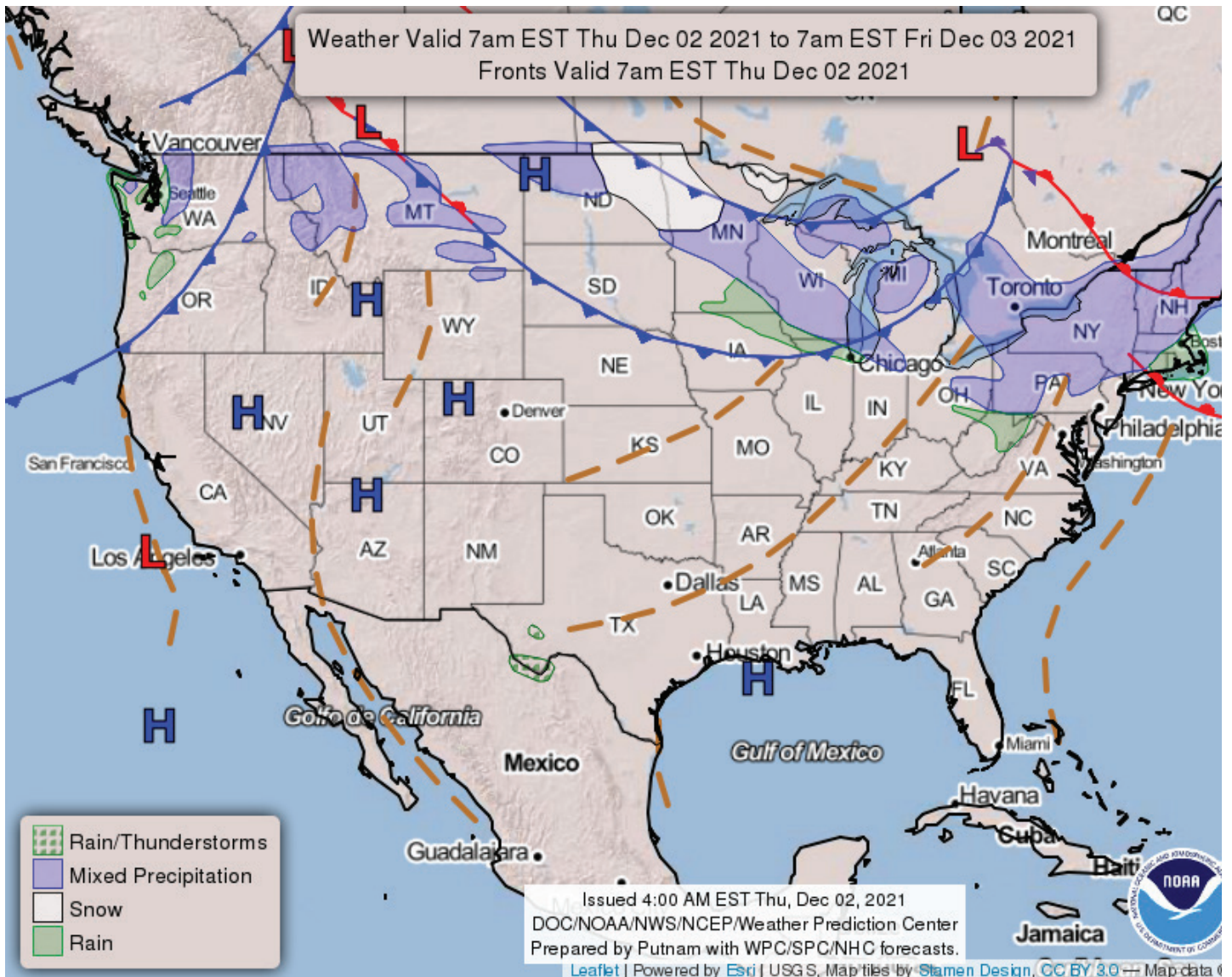
Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 60.6 °F at 2:45 PM
Low Temp: 26.7 °F at 5:00 AM
Wind: 17 mph at 8:30 PM
Precip: 0.05

Record High: 56° in 2012
Record Low: -20° in 1896
Average High: 34°F
Average Low: 13°F
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.04
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.05
Average Precip to date: 21.25
Precip Year to Date: 19.91
Sunset Tonight: 4:52:08 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:52:56 AM

Record High Yesterday

The national weather service in Aberdeen observed a temperature high yesterday of 65 degrees. That breaks the previous record of 62 degrees set in 1969.



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WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Initially, He was named Jesus. Now we also call Him Christ.

Jesus was the name given to Him when He was born. It means the same as the Jewish name, Joshua, which literally means God is salvation! So, the message that God sent to Joseph through His angels was, "You shall call Him 'God is salvation' for He shall save His people from their sins." That name, Jesus, tells us all that we need to know because it reveals God's plan and purpose: God will save humanity through His only begotten Son.

Christ is more than a name. It is a title. It comes from the Greek word Christos, meaning "anointed" or "anointed one." Its meaning is the same as the Hebrew word Messiah. John quoted Andrew in a conversation that he had with his brother Peter. Said Andrew, "We have found the Messiah (which translated means Christ)." So the terms Messiah and Christ are titles given to Jesus that assure us that He is the anointed one. Jesus is the One whom God anointed to fulfill the promises and prophecies of the Old Testament.

The name Jesus proves that He was human, lived life on our level and faced the same issues and problems that we face. But the title Christ assures us that this One, once called Jesus, can lift us up to God's level because He is the One whom God anointed to be our Savior.

Prayer: We thank You, Lord, for what You did for us through Your Son, our Savior. We rejoice in Your love, mercy and grace that brought our salvation through Him. In Jesus' Name, Amen. Scripture For Today: John 1:41 He first found his own brother Simon, and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated, the Christ).

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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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News from the Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Dakota Cash

06-17-26-27-31

(six, seventeen, twenty-six, twenty-seven, thirty-one)

Estimated jackpot: \$20,000

Lotto America

07-09-23-39-47, Star Ball: 3, ASB: 2

(seven, nine, twenty-three, thirty-nine, forty-seven; Star Ball: three; ASB: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$4.73 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$112 million

Powerball

12-15-38-57-63, Powerball: 24, Power Play: 2

(twelve, fifteen, thirty-eight, fifty-seven, sixty-three; Powerball: twenty-four; Power Play: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$264 million

Midwest Economy: November state-by-state glance

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — The Institute for Supply Management, formerly the Purchasing Management Association, began formally surveying its membership in 1931 to gauge business conditions.

The Creighton Economic Forecasting Group uses the same methodology as the national survey to consult supply managers and business leaders. Creighton University economics professor Ernie Goss oversees the report.

The overall index ranges between 0 and 100. Growth neutral is 50, and a figure greater than 50 indicates growth in that factor over the next three to six months. A figure below 50 indicates decline.

Here are the state-by-state results for November:

Arkansas: The overall index for Arkansas declined to 54.6 from 59.0 in October. Components from the November survey were: new orders at 56.4, production or sales at 51.3, delivery lead time at 73.5, inventories at 38.6, and employment at 53.1. According to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Arkansas's seasonally adjusted manufacturing employment was down by almost 1,000 jobs, or 0.6%, compared to its pre-pandemic level. Job gains for the state's durable goods producers were more than offset by losses for the state's nondurable goods manufacturers.

Iowa: The overall index declined to 59.4 from 67.8 in October. Components of the overall index were: new orders at 57.1, production, or sales, at 49.9, delivery lead time at 79.5, employment at 63.3, and inventories at 72.3. According to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Iowa's seasonally adjusted manufacturing employment was down by fewer than 500 jobs, or 0.2%, compared to its pre-pandemic level. Job gains for the state's nondurable goods producers, including food processors, were more than offset by losses for the state's durable goods manufacturers such as metal producers.

Kansas: The overall index fell to 61.2 from 66.5 in October. Components of the overall index were: new orders at 57.4, production or sales at 54.1, delivery lead time at 79.5, employment at 60.7, and inventories at 54.2. According to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, seasonally adjusted manufacturing employment for Kansas was down by 7,000 jobs, or 4.1%, compared to its pre-pandemic level. Job gains for the state's nondurable goods producers, including food processors, were more than offset by losses for the state's durable goods manufacturers such as transportation equipment producers.

Minnesota: The overall index decreased to 65.1 from October's regional high of 70.4. Components of the

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overall index were: new orders at 58.0, production or sales at 55.8, delivery lead time at 83.1, inventories at 63.4, and employment at 65.2. According to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Minnesota's seasonally adjusted manufacturing employment was down by 4,500 jobs, or 1.4%, compared to its pre-pandemic level. Solid job gains for the state's nondurable goods producers, including food processors, were more than offset by losses for the state's durable goods manufacturers such as computer and electronic producers.

Missouri: The overall index rose to 66.3 from 64.4 in October. Components were: new orders at 66.8, production or sales at 54.1, delivery lead time at 84.8, inventories at 62.4, and employment at 63.4. According to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Missouri's seasonally adjusted manufacturing employment was down by fewer than 600 jobs, or 0.2%, compared to its pre-pandemic level. Job gains for the state's durable goods producers, including computer and electronic producers, were more than offset by losses for the state's nondurable goods manufacturers such as food processors.

Nebraska: Nebraska's overall index dipped to 67.0 from 67.5 in October. Components were: new orders at 58.0, production or sales at 55.9, delivery lead time at 83.3, inventories at 63.9, and employment at 74.0. According to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Nebraska's seasonally adjusted manufacturing employment was down by 1,400 jobs, or 1.4%, compared to its pre-pandemic level. Job gains for the state's nondurable goods producers, including food processors, were more than offset by losses for the state's durable goods manufacturers such as computer and electronic parts producers.

North Dakota: The overall index for North Dakota slumped below growth neutral to a regional low 49.6 from October's 52.4, also a regional low. Components were: new orders at 55.6, production or sales at 49.2, delivery lead time at 68.9, employment at 47.4, and inventories at 26.8. According to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, North Dakota's seasonally adjusted manufacturing employment was down by 700 jobs, or 2.6%, compared to its pre-pandemic level. Job gains for the state's nondurable goods producers, including food processors, were more than offset by losses for the state's durable goods manufacturers.

Oklahoma: The overall index expanded above growth neutral in November. The overall index slipped to 62.4 from 63.0 in October. Components were: new orders at 58.0, production or sales at 55.7, delivery lead time at 58.8, inventories at 62.9, and employment at 76.9. According to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Oklahoma's seasonally adjusted manufacturing employment was down by 9,400 jobs, or 6.8%, compared to its pre-pandemic level. Job gains for the state's nondurable goods producers, including food processors, were more than offset by losses for the state's durable goods manufacturers including metal manufacturers.

South Dakota: The South Dakota overall index fell to 55.0 from 62.9 in October. Components were: new orders at 56.4, production or sales at 51.3, delivery lead time at 55.3, inventories at 38.6, and employment at 73.4. According to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, South Dakota seasonally adjusted manufacturing employment was down by only 100 jobs, or 0.2%, compared to its pre-pandemic level. Job gains for the state's nondurable goods producers were offset by slight losses for the state's nondurable goods manufacturers such as food processors.

November economy index falls, but confidence ticks up

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — Business leaders in nine Midwest and Plains states indicate the region's economy remains healthy and have seen their confidence in the economy over the next six months improve, according to a new monthly survey released Wednesday.

But about half of supply managers surveyed expect supply chain disruptions to get worse for the first six months of 2022, according to the latest Creighton University Mid-America Business Conditions report.

The overall index for November of the Creighton University Mid-America Business Conditions fell to 60.2 from October's 65.2. Any score above 50 on the survey's indexes suggests growth, while a score below 50 suggests recession.

Firms reported that transportation issues such as trucking, air and rail delays were the greatest factors accounting for supply chain disruptions. Supply managers named labor shortages as the second most important factor in supply disruptions, said Creighton University economist Ernie Goss, who oversees the monthly survey.

Comments from supply managers indicated that some businesses are reacting to supply chain issues by over-buying, similar to last year's consumer toilet paper shortage. One respondent remarked that some supply managers have changed their mode of operations from "just-in-time" to "have a hunch, buy a bunch," Goss said.

The survey's business confidence index, which looks ahead six months, climbed to a still-weak 46.2 from October's 37.0.

The monthly survey covers Arkansas, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Oklahoma and South Dakota.

South Dakota man pleads not guilty to killing 3, wounding 2

TYNDALL, S.D. (AP) — A South Dakota man has pleaded not guilty to fatally shooting his ex-girlfriend, her father and another woman and wounding his ex-girlfriend's mother and a young child.

Francis Lange, 42, entered the pleas Tuesday in Bon Homme County Circuit Court to charges that include three counts of first-degree murder, two counts of attempted first-degree murder, aggravated assault and committing a felony while armed with a gun. The Nov. 9 attack occurred in Scotland, a small community in southeastern South Dakota, about 60 miles (97 kilometers) southwest of Sioux Falls.

According to court documents, prosecutors allege Lange went to the home of his ex-girlfriend Angela Monclova and fatally shot her, her father Librado Monclova, and Diane Akins. He also shot and wounded his ex-girlfriend's mother, Vicki Monclova, and a 5-year-old girl, according to a criminal complaint. Authorities haven't publicly identified the child.

Lange's attorneys, Seth Klentz of Beresford and Raleigh Hansman of Sioux Falls, said they will seek a mental evaluation of their client.

Judge Cheryl Gering set a Feb. 28 deadline for the state to decide whether to seek the death penalty on the three first-degree murder charges, the Yankton Press and Dakotan reported. Lange has requested a jury trial. Gering scheduled jury selection to begin Oct. 19.

The shooting took place at a Scotland residence where Lange had once lived with his former girlfriend. Despite her wounds, Vicki Monclova managed to make it on foot to her son Anthony Monclova's house, authorities said. Another son, Jacob Monclova, went to his sister's home and discovered the crime scene. He found the wounded girl crying in a bedroom, scooped her up and ran from the house.

When law enforcement and paramedics arrived, Librado and Angela Monclova were already dead, officials said. Akins was taken to a local hospital and was later pronounced dead from an apparent gunshot wound.

Vicki Monclova and the child were taken by helicopter to a Sioux Falls hospital.

Lange is being held in the Bon Homme County Jail in Tyndall.

Man sentenced to 40 years in toddler's starvation death

BROOKINGS, S.D. (AP) — A man has been sentenced to 40 years in prison in the 2019 starvation death of a toddler in Brookings County.

Robert Price, 30, earlier pleaded guilty to first-degree manslaughter in an agreement with prosecutors. Price and Renae Fayant were charged in the death of Fayant's niece, who was in their care.

Fyant was earlier sentenced to 75 years in prison after pleading guilty to first-degree manslaughter. Prosecutors said Fayant was primarily responsible for the child.

The charges against the two say the girl was living in filthy conditions in a small area of the residence in Brookings and was deprived of food and water for an extended period of time.

Brookings police responded to a call to the child's home on July 31, 2019 where they found the girl was unresponsive and was described as "extremely thin appearing malnourished and dehydrated," according to court documents.

The State's Attorney Office acknowledged that Price's sentencing Tuesday reflected his responsibility in the child's death.

Biden launching winter COVID-19 booster, testing campaign

By ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden is set to kick off a more urgent campaign for Americans to get COVID-19 booster shots Thursday as he unveils his winter plans for combating the coronavirus and its omicron variant with enhanced availability of shots and vaccines but without major new restrictions.

The plan includes a requirement for private insurers to cover the cost of at-home COVID-19 tests and a tightening of testing requirements for people entering the U.S. regardless of their vaccination status. But as some other nations close their borders or reimpose lockdowns, officials said Biden was not moving to impose additional restrictions beyond his recommendation that Americans wear masks indoors in public settings.

Biden said Wednesday that the forthcoming strategy, to be unveiled during a speech at the National Institutes of Health, would fight the virus “not with shutdowns or lockdowns but with more widespread vaccinations, boosters, testing, and more.”

The White House released details of Biden’s plan early Thursday, in advance of the speech.

The Biden administration has come to view widespread adoption of booster shots as its most effective tool for combating COVID-19 this winter. Medical experts say boosters provide enhanced and more enduring protection against COVID-19, including new variants.

Much remains unknown about the omicron variant, including whether it is more contagious, whether it makes people more seriously ill and whether it can thwart the vaccines.

About 100 million Americans are eligible for boosters under current U.S. policy, with more becoming eligible every day. Convincing those who have already been vaccinated to get another dose, officials believe, will be far easier than vaccinating the roughly 43 million adult Americans who haven’t gotten a shot despite widespread public pressure campaigns to roll up their sleeves.

And while Biden’s vaccination-or-testing requirement for workers at larger employers has been held up by legal challenges, the president on Thursday will renew his call for businesses to move ahead and impose their own mandates on workers so they can stay open without outbreaks.

In an effort to encourage more people to take the booster doses, the Biden administration is stepping up direct outreach to seniors — the population most vulnerable to the virus. The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services will send a notice to all 63 million Medicare beneficiaries encouraging them to get booster doses, the White House said. The AARP will work with the administration on education campaigns for seniors.

So far about 42 million Americans, about half of them seniors, have received a booster dose. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention this week broadened its booster dose recommendation to cover all Americans aged at least 18 starting six months after their second dose of the mRNA vaccines from Pfizer or Moderna.

The White House said the CDC was also developing new guidance for schools in an effort to reduce or eliminate current quarantine requirements for those who are not fully vaccinated and exposed to the virus. The new policies, which the White House said will be released in the coming weeks, could include so-called “test-to-stay” policies, in which those who are considered close contacts can continue to go to school but wear masks and undergo serial testing, in a bid to minimize learning loss and disruption.

The administration’s upcoming rule to require private insurers to cover at-home testing is still being drafted, and many details remain to be worked out, including under what criteria they will be reimbursable, officials said.

Those insured by Medicare and Medicaid would not be eligible, but the White House said as many as 150 million people with private insurance would see easier and cheaper access to the at-home tests. The administration said it is making 50 million COVID-19 tests free for older people and other vulnerable groups for pickup at senior centers and community sites.

Beginning next week, the White House said, all travelers to the U.S., regardless of nationality or vaccination status, will need to provide proof of a negative COVID-19 test within one day of boarding their

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flights. That's down from three days right now for those who have been vaccinated, in an added precaution against the omicron variant. But the White House has shelved tougher options, like requiring post-arrival testing or requiring quarantines upon arrival in the U.S.

Biden is also extending his directive requiring masks on airplanes and other public transit, which had been set to expire in January, through at least the middle of March, the White House said.

The administration is also informing states that it has more than 60 teams available to help them or their municipalities address surges in cases and public health shortages heading into the winter, with half aimed at bolstering hospital services and 20 targeted at supporting life-saving monoclonal antibody treatments.

Live updates: France reports 1st omicron case on mainland

By The Associated Press undefined

PARIS – French health authorities say they have detected the first confirmed case of the new COVID-19 variant on the country's mainland.

The Ile-de-France Regional Health Agency said Thursday a man in his 50s who lives in the Paris city area tested positive for the omicron variant after returning from a trip to Nigeria.

He showed no symptoms when he and his wife tested positive Nov. 25 on their return to France. The wife's test is being screened for omicron. They have been quarantined at their home since the positive test.

Much remains unknown about the new variant, including whether it is more contagious, as some health authorities suspect, whether it makes people more seriously ill, and whether it can thwart vaccines.

A third person living in the same home with the couple was tested on Thursday to determine if they were infected and, if so, if they are carrying the new variant.

None of the three people are vaccinated, the statement said.

France reported its first omicron case on Tuesday in the island territory of Reunion in the Indian Ocean. The patient was identified as a man who had returned to Reunion from South Africa and Mozambique on Nov. 20.

HERE'S WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW TODAY ABOUT THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC:

- Omicron and delta spell return of unpopular restrictions
- What's the status of the COVID-19 vaccine mandate in the US?
- Japan retracts new flight bookings ban after criticisms
- Biden launching new winter COVID-19 booster, testing campaign

Go to <https://APNews.com/coronavirus-pandemic> for updates throughout the day.

HERE'S WHAT ELSE IS HAPPENING TODAY:

LISBON, Portugal - Health authorities in Portugal say they have confirmed five more cases of the new omicron variant, making a total of 19, all of them linked to a Lisbon soccer club.

The country's Director-General of Health, Graça Feitas, said other suspected omicron cases are being investigated across the country.

Feitas told public broadcaster RTP the number of new daily COVID-19 infections in Portugal could double by the end of the month, to around 9,000.

Despite having one of the highest vaccination rates in Europe, with almost 87% of its 10.3 million people inoculated, Portugal is scaling up its pandemic response amid the emergence of the omicron variant.

It administered some 117,000 COVID-19 tests on Tuesday - the highest number in a single day since the pandemic began.

THE HAGUE, Netherlands — More than half of a group of airline passengers who flew to the Netherlands from South Africa and were ordered into isolation after testing positive for COVID-19 are being released from quarantine.

The local health authority said Thursday that more than half of the remaining 44 people who are in

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isolation at a hotel near the airport are being allowed out after testing negative.

Local health authority director Bert van de Velden paid tribute to the travelers who arrived last week at Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport for their "good cooperation in what was for them a difficult situation of isolation."

More than 600 passengers underwent testing last week on the last two flights to arrive in the Netherlands after the government imposed a flight ban prompted by the discovery of the omicron variant in southern Africa.

Those who tested positive to the coronavirus had to go into isolation. Sequencing later established that at least 14 of them had the new variant.

SEOUL, South Korea -- South Korea has broken its daily record for coronavirus infections for a second straight day, with more than 5,200 new cases.

The rapid delta-driven spread comes amid the emergence of the new omicron variant.

South Korea confirmed its first five omicron cases Wednesday night linked to arrivals from Nigeria, prompting the government to tighten its border controls.

The country will require all passengers arriving from abroad over the next two weeks to quarantine for at least 10 days, regardless of their nationality or vaccination status.

Health experts have called for the government to reimpose strict social distancing rules that were eased in November to improve the economy, raising concerns that hospital systems could become overwhelmed.

BUDAPEST, Hungary - The number of daily COVID-19 deaths in Hungary has reached a high not seen since a devastating wave last spring, with 218 reported Thursday.

Hungary now has the highest number of daily deaths per million inhabitants in the world, according to data from Johns Hopkins University, with 17.7 deaths per million in the country of fewer than 10 million people.

Just under 60% of Hungary's total population is fully vaccinated, below the European Union average of 66.2%.

As many of the Central European country's neighbors have instituted lockdowns, nighttime curfews and other measures, Hungary's government has opted to keep its economy open.

Despite a mass vaccination drive that began last week, a surge in new cases has continued and the number of daily deaths reached the highest since April 16.

MILAN - Italy's drug agency has approved the use of the Pfizer vaccine for children aged between 5-11.

The decision Thursday came less than a week after the European Union drug regulator said it was safe to use the jab for children.

Italian officials said children will be administered one-third of the dose authorized for adults and adolescents, in two doses at a distance of three weeks, beginning Dec. 15.

In Italy, 77% of the total population is fully vaccinated and officials are urging the eligible population to get a booster shot.

LONDON - Britain has ordered a further 114 million doses of coronavirus vaccines as it ramps up a campaign to give all adults a booster shot.

Health officials hope the increased protection will help keep the new and potentially more transmissible omicron variant at bay, even if it proves more resistant to vaccines than other strains.

The government says 60 million Moderna doses and 54 million doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine will be delivered in 2022 and 2023 -- a sign authorities think further booster shots may be required.

The World Health Organization has criticized wealthy countries for stockpiling vaccines when many nations have received few or none.

Britain says it will give 100 million doses of vaccine to developing nations by mid-2022, but most of them have not yet been delivered.

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ATHENS, Greece -- Greek lawmakers have approved legislation making vaccination for COVID-19 mandatory for all people aged over 60 living in the country on pain of a monthly fine, to deal with an infection surge and the emergence of the omicron variant.

The draft law backed Wednesday by the center-right government and a center-left opposition party — but rejected by all other opposition parties — targets the country's age group that is most vulnerable to death or intubation from the coronavirus.

Some 17% of Greeks aged over 60 have not yet been vaccinated. They have until Jan. 16 to get their first jabs, or will be fined 100 euros (\$113) for every month they remain unvaccinated.

Parties that opposed the measure said it was too harsh on low-income people who don't want to be inoculated.

DES MOINES, Iowa — Iowa hospitalizations from the coronavirus have reached a high for this year with 721 people being treated in hospitals.

The last time hospitalizations reached that level was mid-December of 2020 when the state was coming down from the historic peak of COVID-19 activity in November.

Hospitalizations peaked at more than 1,500 patients in mid-November 2020. Iowa Department of Public Health data released Wednesday indicates 10 children age 11 or younger are in the hospital. All are unvaccinated.

An additional unvaccinated child between ages 12 and 17 is hospitalized. The state also confirmed 91 additional deaths in the past week, with some dating back to mid-September. Iowa officials report a total of 7,445 COVID-19 deaths.

JOHANNESBURG — South Africa's new cases of COVID-19 nearly doubled in a day, authorities reported Wednesday, signaling a dramatic surge in the country where scientists detected the omicron variant last week.

New confirmed cases rose to 8,561 Wednesday from 4,373 a day earlier, according to official statistics.

Scientists in South Africa said they are bracing for a rapid increase in COVID-19 cases following the discovery of the new omicron variant.

"There is a possibility that we are going to see a vast increase in number of cases being identified in South Africa," Dr. Nicky Gumede-Moeletsi, regional virologist for the World Health Organization, told The Associated Press.

The omicron variant has been detected in five of South Africa's nine provinces and accounted for 74% of the virus genomes sequenced in November, the country's National Institute for Communicable Diseases announced Wednesday.

Omicron and delta spell return of unpopular restrictions

By LORI HINNANT Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — Greeks who are over age 60 and refuse coronavirus vaccinations could be hit with monthly fines of more than one-quarter of their pensions — a get-tough policy that the country's politicians say will cost votes but save lives.

In Israel, potential carriers of the new omicron variant could be tracked by the nation's domestic security agency in seeming defiance of a Supreme Court ruling from the last go-round.

Weekly protests in the Netherlands over the country's 5 p.m. lockdown and other new restrictions have descended into violence, despite what appears to be overwhelming acceptance of the rules.

With the delta variant of COVID-19 pushing up cases in Europe and growing fears over the omicron variant, governments around the world are weighing new measures for populations tired of hearing about restrictions and vaccines.

It's a thorny calculus made more difficult by the prospect of backlash, increased social divisions and, for

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many politicians, the fear of being voted out of office.

"I know the frustration that we all feel with this omicron variant, the sense of exhaustion that we could be going through this all over again," British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said Tuesday, two days after the government announced that masks would be mandatory again in stores and on public transportation and required all visitors from abroad to undergo a COVID-19 test and quarantine. "We're trying to take a balanced and proportioned approach."

New restrictions, or variations on the old ones, are cropping up around the world, especially in Europe, where leaders are at pains to explain what looks like a failed promise: that mass vaccinations would mean an end to widely loathed limitations.

"People need normality. They need families, they need to see people, obviously safely, socially distancing, but I really think, this Christmas now, people have had enough," said Belinda Storey, who runs a stall at a Christmas market in Nottingham, England.

In the Netherlands, where the curfew went into effect last week, mounted police patrol to break up demonstrations against the new lockdown, which is among the world's strictest. But most people appeared resigned to rush through errands and head home.

"The only thing we can do is to listen to the rules, follow them and hope it's not getting worse. For me it's no problem. I'm a nurse. I know how sick people get," said Wilma van Kampen.

In Greece, residents over 60 face fines of 100 euros (\$113) a month if they fail to get vaccinated. The fines will be tacked onto tax bills in January.

About 17% of Greeks over 60 are unvaccinated despite various efforts to prod them to get their shots, and nine in 10 Greeks currently dying of COVID-19 are over 60.

"I don't care whether the measure will cost me some extra votes in the elections," Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said Wednesday after lawmakers passed the measure. "I am convinced that we are doing the right thing, and I am convinced that this policy will save lives."

Employing a carrot instead of a stick, Slovakia's government is proposing to give people 60 and older a 500-euro (\$568) bonus if they get vaccinated.

In Israel, the government this week approved resuming the use of a controversial phone-monitoring technology to perform contact tracing of people confirmed to have the omicron variant.

Israeli rights groups have decried the use of the technology as a violation of privacy rights, and others have noted that its accuracy in indoor places is flawed, leading to large numbers of people being wrongly flagged. The Supreme Court earlier this year issued a ruling limiting its use.

"We need to use this tool in extreme situations, and I am not convinced we are in that kind of situation," Justice Minister Gideon Saar told Israeli public broadcaster Kan this week.

In South Africa, which alerted the World Health Organization to the omicron variant, previous restrictions included curfews and a ban on alcohol sales. This time, President Cyril Ramaphosa is simply calling on more people to get vaccines "to help restore the social freedoms we all yearn for."

In the U.S., there is little appetite in either political party for a return to lockdowns or strict contact tracing. Enforcing even simple measures like mask-wearing has become a political flashpoint. And Republicans are suing to block the Biden administration's new get-vaccinated-or-get-tested requirement for large employers.

President Joe Biden, whose political fate may well hinge on controlling the pandemic, has used a combination of pressure and urgent appeals to induce people to get their first shots or a booster. Also, the administration is working toward requiring that all air travelers to the U.S. be tested within a day before boarding their flight, instead of the current three days.

But Biden has said the U.S. will fight COVID-19 and the new variant "not with shutdowns or lockdowns but with more widespread vaccinations, boosters, testing, and more."

"If people are vaccinated and wear their masks, there's no need for the lockdowns," he added.

The rise of the new variant makes little difference to Mark Christensen, a grain buyer for an ethanol plant in Nebraska. He rejects any vaccination mandate and doesn't understand why it would be needed. In any event, he said, most businesses in his corner of the state are too small to fall under the regulations.

"If they were just encouraging me to take it, that's one thing," Christensen said. "But I believe in freedom

of choice, not decisions by force.”

Chile has taken a harder line since the emergence of omicron: People over 18 must receive a booster dose every six months to keep their pass that allows access to restaurants, hotels and public gatherings.

And Chile never dropped its requirement to wear masks in public — probably the most common renewed restriction around the world.

Dr. Madhukar Pai, of McGill University’s School of Population and Public Health, said that masks are an easy and pain-free way of keeping transmission down, but that cheap, at-home tests need to be much more widespread, in both rich and poor countries.

He said both approaches give people a sense of control over their own behavior that is lost with a lock-down and make it easier to accept the need to do things like cancel a party or stay inside.

Pai said requiring boosters universally, as is essentially the case in Israel, Chile and many countries in Europe, including France, will only prolong the pandemic by making it harder to get first doses to the developing world. That raises the odds of still more variants.

Lockdowns, he said, should be the very last choice.

“Lockdowns only come up when a system is failing,” he said. “We do it when the hospital system is about to collapse. It’s a last resort that indicates you have failed to do all the right things.”

That’s not how lockdowns are seen in communist China, which allows little dissent. At each new outbreak, entire cities are sealed, and sometimes millions of people undergo mass testing. In the strictest lockdowns, people are forbidden to leave their homes, and groceries are brought to their door.

So far, China hasn’t seen the need for new restrictions in response to the omicron variant. The head of China’s Center for Disease Control’s Epidemiology unit, Wu Zunyou, said omicron, for now, poses a manageable threat, and “no matter what variant, our public health measures are effective.”

Associated Press journalists Nicholas Paphitis in Athens, Greece; Tia Goldenberg in Jerusalem; Aleks Furtula in Nijmegen, Netherlands; Zeke Miller in Washington; Patricia Luna in Santiago, Chile; Grant Schulte in Lincoln, Nebraska; Andrew Meldrum in Johannesburg; Huizhong Wu in Taipei, Taiwan, and Chen Si in Shanghai contributed.

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

UK court backs Meghan in dispute over privacy with publisher

By SYLVIA HUI and JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — The Duchess of Sussex on Thursday won the latest stage in her long-running privacy lawsuit against a newspaper publisher over its publication of parts of a letter she wrote to her estranged father.

The Court of Appeal in London upheld a High Court ruling in February that publication of the letter that the former Meghan Markle wrote to her father Thomas Markle after she married Prince Harry in 2018 was unlawful and breached her privacy.

The publisher of the Mail on Sunday and the MailOnline website challenged that decision at the Court of Appeal, which held a hearing last month. Dismissing that appeal, senior judge Geoffrey Vos told the court in a brief hearing Thursday that “the Duchess had a reasonable expectation of privacy in the contents of the letter. Those contents were personal, private and not matters of legitimate public interest.”

In a statement, Meghan, 40, said the ruling was “a victory not just for me, but for anyone who has ever felt scared to stand up for what’s right.”

“While this win is precedent-setting, what matters most is that we are now collectively brave enough to reshape a tabloid industry that conditions people to be cruel, and profits from the lies and pain that they create,” she said.

Associated Newspapers disputed Meghan’s claim that she didn’t intend the letter to be seen by anyone

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but her father. They said correspondence between Meghan and her then-communications secretary, Jason Knauf, showed the duchess suspected her father might leak the letter to journalists and wrote it with that in mind.

The publisher also argued that the publication of the letter was part of Thomas Markle's right to reply following a People magazine interview with five of Meghan's friends alleging he was "cruelly cold-shouldering" his daughter in the run-up to her royal wedding.

But Vos said that the article, which the Mail on Sunday described as "sensational," was "splashed as a new public revelation" rather than focusing on Thomas Markle's response to negative media reports about him.

In their appeal, Associated Newspapers had also argued that Meghan made private information public by cooperating with Omid Scobie and Carolyn Durand, authors of "Finding Freedom," a sympathetic book about her and Harry.

The duchess' lawyers had previously denied that she or Harry collaborated with the authors. But Knauf said in evidence to the court that he gave the writers information, and discussed it with Harry and Meghan.

Knauf's evidence, which hadn't previously been disclosed, was a dramatic twist in the long-running case.

In response, Meghan apologized for misleading the court about the extent of her cooperation with the book's authors.

The duchess said she didn't remember the discussions with Knauf when she gave evidence earlier in the case, "and I apologize to the court for the fact that I had not remembered these exchanges at the time."

"I had absolutely no wish or intention to mislead the defendant or the court," she said.

Meghan, a former star of the American TV legal drama "Suits," married Harry, a grandson of Queen Elizabeth II, at Windsor Castle in May 2018.

Meghan and Harry announced in early 2020 that they were quitting royal duties and moving to North America, citing what they said were the unbearable intrusions and racist attitudes of the British media. They have settled in Santa Barbara, California, with their two young children.

In her statement Thursday, Meghan strongly condemned Associated Newspapers for treating the lawsuit as "a game with no rules." She said she had been subject to "deception, intimidation and calculated attacks" in the three years since the lawsuit began.

"The longer they dragged it out, the more they could twist facts and manipulate the public (even during the appeal itself), making a straightforward case extraordinarily convoluted in order to generate more headlines and sell more newspapers — a model that rewards chaos above truth," she said.

US defense chief slams China's drive for hypersonic weapons

By HYUNG-JIN KIM and KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — America's defense chief rebuked China on Thursday, vowing to confront its potential military threats in Asia and warning that its pursuit of hypersonic weapons intended to evade U.S. missile defenses "increases tensions in the region."

U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's stern comments after annual security talks with South Korea, a top U.S. ally, are a window into one of the Biden administration's top foreign policy worries: How should Washington and its partners contain a Chinese military that is strengthening — both in sheer firepower and in confidence — as it pursues an end of American dominance in Asia?

China sees much of Asia as its natural sphere of influence. But many in the region warn of a pattern of Chinese interference, accompanied by moves to acquire the weapons needed to dominate its rivals. Austin's comments were directed at China's July test of a hypersonic weapon capable of partially orbiting Earth before reentering the atmosphere and gliding on a maneuverable path to its target.

Experts say the weapons system is clearly designed to evade U.S. missile defenses, although China insisted it was testing a reusable space vehicle, not a missile.

"We have concerns about the military capabilities that the PRC continues to pursue, and the pursuit of those capabilities increases tensions in the region," Austin said about the hypersonic weapons test, using the abbreviation for the People's Republic of China, the country's official name.

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"We'll continue to maintain the capabilities to defend and deter against a range of potential threats from the PRC to ourselves and to our allies," he said.

The Pentagon released on Monday the results of a global posture review that calls for additional cooperation with allies to deter "potential Chinese military aggression and threats from North Korea."

Last month, Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said the United States is also working on hypersonic weapons. But there is worry in Washington that it is lagging behind China and Russia in pursuing these types of weapons. Russia said Monday its navy successfully tested a prospective hypersonic cruise missile.

Hypersonic weapons, which fly at speeds in excess of Mach 5, or five times the speed of sound, could pose crucial challenges to missile defense systems because of their speed and maneuverability. But some experts argue that hypersonic weapons would add little to America's ability to deter war and worry that they could trigger a new, destabilizing arms race.

Austin also addressed another major U.S. worry: North Korea.

He said that he agreed with South Korean Defense Minister Suh Wook that the North's growing weapons program "is increasingly destabilizing for regional security." Austin said the allies remain committed to a diplomatic approach to North Korea.

Suh said the two agreed on a document updating joint contingency plans in the event of a war on the peninsula to reflect changes in North Korean threats and other conditions, but didn't elaborate on the document's details.

North Korea's nuclear arsenal is believed to have grown significantly in recent years.

After a series of high-profile missile and nuclear tests in 2016-17, North Korea claimed to have the ability to launch nuclear strikes on the American homeland. According to a 2018 South Korean estimate, North Korea has built up to 60 nuclear weapons.

Despite severe economic hardships related to the pandemic, North Korea has continuously rebuffed U.S. offers to resume disarmament talks, saying Washington must first abandon its hostility. The Biden administration maintains that international sanctions on North Korea will stay in place until the country takes concrete steps toward denuclearization.

The United States stations about 28,500 soldiers in South Korea to deter potential aggression from North Korea. During Thursday's meeting, Austin highlighted a U.S. commitment to maintain the current level of U.S. forces, according to a joint statement.

The alliance, forged during the 1950-53 Korean War, was tested in recent years as then-President Donald Trump threatened to pull U.S. troops out of South Korea if Seoul did not drastically increase its financial support for them. Trump also repeatedly complained of the cost of regular military drills between Washington and Seoul.

Such concerns have eased since President Joe Biden took office in January. But the alliance still faces challenges such as Seoul's historical disputes with Japan, another key U.S. regional ally, and its hesitation to join U.S.-led initiatives targeting China, its biggest trading partner.

Austin and Suh pledged to continue trilateral cooperation involving Japan. But they didn't elaborate on how South Korea and Japan could overcome tensions stemming largely from Tokyo's 1910-45 colonization of the Korean Peninsula.

WTA to AP: Loss of China events over Peng could go past '22

By HOWARD FENDRICH AP Tennis Writer

The suspension of all WTA tournaments in China because of concerns about the safety of Peng Shuai, a Grand Slam doubles champion who accused a former government official there of sexual assault, could result in cancellations of those events beyond 2022, the head of the women's professional tennis tour told The Associated Press on Wednesday.

"We're hopeful we get to the right place, but we are prepared, if it continues as it is — which hasn't been productive to date — that we will not be operating in the region," WTA President and CEO Steve Simon

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said in a video call from California. "This is an organizational effort that is really addressing something that's about what's right and wrong."

He said the move to put a halt to the tour's play in China, including Hong Kong, came with the backing of the WTA Board of Directors, players, tournaments and sponsors. It is the strongest public stand against China taken by a sports body — and one that could cost the WTA millions of dollars.

Peng dropped out of public view after raising the allegations about former vice premier Zhang Gaoli in a Nov. 2 social media posting that was quickly taken down by Chinese authorities.

In the month since, Simon has made repeated calls for China to carry out an inquiry into the 35-year-old Peng's accusations and to allow the WTA to communicate directly with the former No. 1-ranked doubles player and owner of titles at Wimbledon and the French Open.

"Our approach to this and our request to the authorities are consistent and they'll stay there. We definitely would like to have our own discussion with Peng and be comfortable that she's truly safe and free and has not been censored, intimidated or anything like that," Simon told The AP. "We still haven't been able to have that conversation to have the comfort that what we're seeing isn't being orchestrated, to date. The second element of that is that we want a full and transparent — without any level of censorship — investigation on the allegations that were made."

China typically hosts about 10 women's tennis tournaments each year, including the prestigious season-ending WTA Finals, which are scheduled to be held there for a decade. The nation is a source of billions of dollars in income for various sports entities based elsewhere, including the WTA (headquartered in St. Petersburg, Florida), the NBA (run out of New York) and the International Olympic Committee (Lausanne, Switzerland).

Simon said the suspension, announced Wednesday via a statement from him issued by the tour, means that tournaments could still end up being staged in China if its government follows through with his requests. If not, the events could be moved to other countries, as happened this year, when the tour's Asian swing was called off because of COVID-19 concerns; the WTA Finals, for example, were shifted to Guadalajara, Mexico, last month.

"We haven't canceled, as of yet, but we're prepared to get to that point," Simon said on the video call. "And that'll be a point of discussion at some point: Where do you get to cancellation? Is it 2022 only? Is it for the future? I mean, those are all questions that will come down the road."

Beijing is set to host the Winter Games beginning on Feb. 4, and IOC President Thomas Bach said on Nov. 21 that he spoke with Peng — a three-time Olympian — on a 30-minute video call, and that she appeared to be "doing fine."

"This was reconfirmed in yesterday's call," the IOC said on Thursday, revealing that its officials held another video call with Peng on Wednesday. "Our human and person-centered approach means that we continue to be concerned about her personal situation and will continue to support her."

Once again, the IOC did not release video or a transcript of the exchange, nor explain how the call was arranged.

The IOC repeated on Thursday its policy of "quiet diplomacy" dealing directly with sports officials "which, given the circumstances and based on the experience of governments and other organizations, is indicated to be the most promising way to proceed effectively in such humanitarian matters."

The European Union said Tuesday it wants China to offer "verifiable proof" that Peng is safe.

A number of Chinese businesspeople, activists and ordinary people have disappeared in recent years after criticizing ruling Communist Party figures or in crackdowns on corruption or pro-democracy and labor rights campaigns.

A statement attributed to Peng two weeks and tweeted out by the international arm of Chinese state broadcaster CCTV included a retraction of her accusations.

"In good conscience, I don't see how I can ask our athletes to compete there when Peng Shuai is not allowed to communicate freely and has seemingly been pressured to contradict her allegation of sexual assault," Simon said in the release announcing the suspensions. "Given the current state of affairs, I am

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also greatly concerned about the risks that all of our players and staff could face if we were to hold events in China in 2022.”

Asked twice about the WTA’s suspension of China tournaments and concerns about Peng Shuai’s safety, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin refused to address either of the issues.

“We are always firmly opposed to acts that politicize sports,” Wang said in a one-sentence response to journalists at a daily ministry briefing.

In a tweet, the editor of hard-line nationalist Communist Party newspaper Global Times criticized the WTA for “coercing Peng Shuai to support the West’s attack on Chinese system.” Like other Western social media platforms, Twitter is blocked in China.

The U.S. Tennis Association commended Simon and the WTA, tweeting a statement that read: “This type of leadership is courageous and what is needed to ensure the rights of all individuals are protected and all voices are heard.”

International Tennis Federation spokeswoman Heather Bowler said the ITF board would meet Thursday to discuss the matter.

“I applaud Steve Simon and the WTA leadership for taking a strong stand on defending human rights in China and around the world,” women’s tennis pioneer Billie Jean King said. “The WTA has chosen to be on the right side of history in defending the rights of our players. This is yet another reason why women’s tennis is the leader in women’s sports.”

Concerns about the censoring of Peng’s post and her subsequent disappearance from public view turned #WhereIsPengShuai into a trending topic on social media and drew support from tennis stars such as Serena Williams, Naomi Osaka, Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal, Novak Djokovic and Martina Navratilova.

But news of the first #MeToo case to reach the political realm in China has not been reported by the domestic media and online discussion of it has been highly censored.

“I can only imagine the range of emotions and feelings that Peng is likely going through right now. I hope she knows that none of this is her fault, and that we remain very proud of her extreme courage that she’s shown through this,” Simon told the AP. “But the one thing that we can’t do is walk away from this, because if we’re walking away from the key elements — which is obviously not only her well-being, but the investigation — then we’re telling the world that not addressing sexual assault with respect to the seriousness it requires is OK, because it’s too difficult. And it’s simply something that we can’t let happen.”

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

Analysis: Iran ups nuclear ante as Vienna deal talks resume

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — After a monthslong hiatus, Iran has returned to negotiations in Vienna aimed at reviving its cratered nuclear deal with world powers. But Tehran isn’t slowing down the advances in its atomic program, further raising the stakes in talks crucial to cooling years of tensions boiling in the wider Mideast.

The case in point? Iran’s underground nuclear facility in Fordo.

The International Atomic Energy Agency, the United Nations body charged with monitoring the Islamic Republic’s program, acknowledged Wednesday that Iran began feeding a cascade of 166 advanced IR-6 centrifuges with uranium there. The agency said Iran plans to enrich uranium there up to 20% purity — a short, technical step from weapons-grade levels of 90%.

Tehran’s diplomatic mission to Vienna sought to downplay the acknowledgement on Twitter as “an ordinary update in line with regular verification in Iran.” However, even in clinical language the announcement offers a stark contrast to what existed under the 2015 nuclear deal, which saw Iran limit its enrichment of uranium in exchange for the lifting of economic sanctions.

The deal halted all enrichment at Fordo, which sits under a mountain near the holy Shiite city of Qom, some 90 kilometers (55 miles) southwest of Tehran. The accord also called for Fordo to become a research-

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and-development facility.

The deal focused on Fordo because the site long has been a major point of contention for the West. It is about the size of a football field, large enough to house 3,000 centrifuges, but small and hardened enough to lead U.S. officials to suspect it had a military purpose when they exposed the site publicly in 2009.

Then-President Barack Obama, alongside France's president and Britain's prime minister, dramatically announced to the world Iran had built the site after years of tensions over Tehran's program.

"As the international community knows, this is not the first time that Iran has concealed information about its nuclear program," Obama said at the time.

Iran asserted Fordo's secret construction came as part of its "sovereign right of safeguarding ... sensitive nuclear facilities through various means" as it faced the threat of military attack. But burying the facility under some 80 meters (260 feet) of dirt and rock while not informing international inspectors as required only heightened Western concerns. U.S. intelligence agencies and international inspectors believe Iran had an organized nuclear weapons program until 2003.

Now, just days into the new negotiations in Vienna, Iran has acknowledged the higher enrichment there with advanced centrifuges also barred by the accord. It may be another hard-line negotiation tactic like the others embraced by the diplomatic team under new President Ebrahim Raisi.

Raisi, a protégé of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has said he wants to see the economic sanctions pummeling Iran's economy lifted.

But pressing too many demands too fast while advancing Iran's nuclear program may alienate Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia, the other parties to the accord. Iran's state-run IRNA news agency reported Thursday that Iranian negotiators also handed over two new documents of demands.

It also makes re-entering the deal that much more politically complicated for President Joe Biden. His negotiators remain outside of the room where the talks are going on due to his predecessor Donald Trump unilaterally withdrawing from the deal in 2018, sparking years of wider tensions in the Mideast that continue today.

A breakdown in the talks or further advances by Iran raise regional risks. Already, Tehran finds itself locked in a wider shadow war with Israel. Iranian officials blame Israel for attacks on its Natanz nuclear site, as well as the gunning down of a scientist identified as the founder of its military nuclear program.

Some of those attacks came under former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who long targeted Iran. Israel's new premier, Naftali Bennett, has kept up that pressure. Bennett spoke Thursday with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and described Iran as carrying out "nuclear blackmail as a negotiation tactic" with its enrichment at Fordo, according to a statement from his office.

An Israeli official said the country assesses that Iran could produce enough 90%-enriched uranium for a single nuclear bomb within a month. Even if Iran had enough weapons-grade material, it would need to choose to construct a bomb itself — still a complicated engineering feat. Tehran insists its program is peaceful.

The Israeli official, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to comment publicly, said that Israel still considers a military strike against Iran to be a viable option and is preparing for all scenarios.

Israeli leaders have said they would still prefer a diplomatic solution reaching a "longer, stronger" deal that includes Iran's missile program and its support of regional militias. But they insist any diplomacy must be accompanied by a credible military threat.

Israel hasn't shied in the past from conducting airstrikes to halt its neighbor's nuclear ambitions, whether in Iraq in 1981 or Syria in 2007. It remains unclear, however, what that line in Iran would be for Tel Aviv.

What also remains unclear is how Israel could strike a target as deep as Fordo. After the facility's discovery, the U.S. rushed to finalize its Massive Ordnance Penetrator — a 13,600-kilogram (30,000-pound) bomb able to penetrate deep into the ground before exploding. That bomb remains in American hands, however, and it's unlikely Israeli air force fighters could even carry it given its mammoth size.

But, if Iran is right, Israel was able not once but twice in a year to cause explosions at its Natanz nuclear site. One such blast targeted Natanz's underground enrichment halls as well. An Israeli television program

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that featured outgoing Mossad intelligence chief Yossi Cohen in June suggested spies somehow planted explosives under the halls' marble flooring during construction.

Associated Press writer Josef Federman in Jerusalem contributed to this report.

EDITOR'S NOTE — Jon Gambrell, the news director for the Gulf and Iran for The Associated Press, has reported from each of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, Iran and other locations across the world since joining the AP in 2006. Follow him on Twitter at www.twitter.com/jongambrellAP.

Island turns into open-air lab for tech-savvy volcanologists

By ARITZ PARRA and EMILIO MORENATTI Associated Press

LAS MANCHAS, Canary Islands (AP) — They come with eagle-eyed drones and high-precision instruments. Aided by satellites, they analyze gas emissions and the flows of molten rock. On the ground, they collect everything from the tiniest particles to "lava bombs" the size of watermelons that one of nature's most powerful forces hurl as incandescent projectiles.

Scientists from around the world are flocking to La Palma, one of Spain's Canary Islands in the Atlantic Ocean, to take advantage of a volcanic eruption happening just an hour's drive from an international airport and the safety of being able to work under the escort of military brigades. They are applying cutting-edge technologies to scrutinize a rare volcanic eruption from the land, the sea, the air — and even space.

As in the two dozen other major live eruptions across the planet, from Hawaii to Indonesia, the ultimate goal on La Palma is to use a unique window of opportunity to better understand volcanic eruptions: how they form, develop and, even more crucially for the islanders, how and when they end.

But despite recent technological and scientific leaps, the researchers can only do a lot of estimating of what happens in the underworld where magma is formed and melts any human-made equipment. The deepest that humans have been able to drill into the planet's crust has been just over 12 kilometers (7.6 miles), a feat that Soviet scientists achieved in 1989.

"There has been a lot of progress in the last 30 or 40 years in the understanding of geological and evolutionary processes, but it's still difficult to know for sure what happens at 40 to 80 kilometers (25 to 50 miles) of depth," said Pedro Hernández, an expert with the Canary Islands' volcanology institute, Involcan.

"We are probably beginning to know the stars better than what happens under our feet," he said.

Volcanic eruptions are a one or, at most, twice-in-a-generation event in the Canary Islands archipelago, which lies 100 kilometers (62 miles) northwest of Africa. Some of the Canary Islands are still growing due to magma accumulating underneath and, as is happening in La Palma, by forming lava peninsulas beyond the coastline.

The last eruption, a decade ago on the southern island of El Hierro, happened just off the coast, which made it more difficult for volcanologists trying to collect samples. The previous land volcano erupted in La Palma in 1971, the year when Valentin Troll, an expert in rocks with Sweden's Uppsala University and co-author of a geology study of the archipelago, was born.

"It's been mind-blowing, literally, to see this dynamism in action," the geologist said. "We are learning so much about how volcanoes work."

Still, trying to compare notes with previous eruptions involves delving into centuries-old records, some from a time when photography did not exist.

When magma started accumulating deep under La Palma's Cumbre Vieja range, scientists were measuring the surge on the land's surface, concentrations of quakes known as seismic swarms and other signs of an impending eruption. They weren't able to predict the exact time of the eruption, but their assessments prompted authorities to begin the first evacuations just hours before it took place on Sept. 19.

Although one man died in November when he fell from a roof while cleaning off volcanic ash, there have been no deaths directly linked to the eruption.

Much of that is due to new technologies in volcanology: everything from drones that allow scientists to

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peek into a volcanic cauldron to supercomputers that run prediction algorithms.

The European Union's Copernicus satellite program has produced high-resolution imagery and mapping of the island to track quake-induced deformations, leading to near real-time tracking of lava flows and ash accumulation. Its experts have also been able to observe how large plumes of sulfur dioxide, a toxic gas, have traveled long distances across North Africa, the European mainland and even as far as the Caribbean.

At sea, Spanish research vessels are studying the impact the eruption is having on the marine ecosystem as fingers of lava extend out beyond the coast.

The next big leap for volcanology is expected when robotically operated rovers like the ones sent to the moon or Mars can be used in volcanoes, said Troll, who thinks knowledge from those rovers could guide how to rebuild the tourism-dependent island.

"We need to learn how we can protect the population as well as the growing industry to build a sustainable society," he said.

Despite its limited resources, Involcan has been producing daily reports that help civil protection authorities on La Palma decide whether to evacuate or issue lockdowns when gas concentrations become too toxic. That means analyzing terabytes of data, both from automatic detectors in strategic locations and from samples recovered in field trips.

Most of the scientists' work has been focused on predicting how far the volcano's damage will impact a community that has already lost thousands of houses, farms, roads, irrigation canals and banana crops. But the question of when the eruption will end has been haunting them.

Hernández said it would take at least two weeks of consistent lessening in soil deformation, sulfur dioxide emissions and seismic activity to establish whether the volcano's activity is waning.

Esteban Gazel, a geochemist with Cornell University in New York, said the Canary Islands are closely connected to activity going all the way to the core of the earth, making it even more difficult to make predictions.

"It's like treating a patient," he said. "You can monitor how (the eruption) evolves, but saying exactly when it will die is extremely difficult."

In La Palma, Gazel collected the smallest particles that winds transport for long distances as part of NASA-funded research that could be key in minimizing the risks if a catastrophic eruption degraded air quality and influenced climate patterns. He also runs a parallel research program that looks at the volumes of gases that make an eruption more or less explosive.

Originally from Costa Rica, where he studied traces of past eruptions, Gazel has also conducted research in Hawaii's active Kilauea volcano. But the La Palma eruption has brought a new dimension to his work, he said, because of the different compositions of the rock and the easy access to the volcanic exclusion area.

"The more eruptions that we study, the more we are going to understand how they behave," he said.

Aritz Parra reported from Madrid.

Follow all AP stories on volcanos at <https://apnews.com/hub/volcanic-eruptions>

MLB owners lock out players, 1st work stoppage since 1995

By RONALD BLUM and STEPHEN HAWKINS AP Baseball Writers

IRVING, Texas (AP) — Major League Baseball plunged into its first work stoppage in a quarter-century when the sport's collective bargaining agreement expired Wednesday night and owners immediately locked out players in a move that threatens spring training and opening day.

The strategy, management's equivalent of a strike under federal labor law, ended the sport's labor peace after 9,740 days over 26 1/2 years.

Teams decided to force the long-anticipated confrontation during an offseason rather than risk players walking out during the summer, as they did in 1994. Players and owners had successfully reached four consecutive agreements without a work stoppage, but they have been accelerating toward a clash for

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more than two years.

"We believe that an offseason lockout is the best mechanism to protect the 2022 season," baseball Commissioner Rob Manfred wrote in a letter to fans. "We hope that the lockout will jumpstart the negotiations and get us to an agreement that will allow the season to start on time. This defensive lockout was necessary because the players' association's vision for Major League Baseball would threaten the ability of most teams to be competitive."

Talks that started last spring ended Wednesday after a brief session of mere minutes with the sides far apart on the dozens of key economic issues. Management's negotiators left the union's hotel about nine hours before the deal lapsed at 11:59 p.m. EST.

MLB's 30 controlling owners held a brief digital meeting to reaffirm their lockout decision, and MLB delivered the announcement of its fourth-ever lockout — to go along with five strikes — in an emailed letter to the Major League Baseball Players Association.

"This drastic and unnecessary measure will not affect the players' resolve to reach a fair contract," union head Tony Clark said in a statement. "We remain committed to negotiating a new collective bargaining agreement that enhances competition, improves the product for our fans, and advances the rights and benefits of our membership."

This stoppage began 30 days after Atlanta's World Series win capped a complete season following a pandemic-shortened 2020 played in empty ballparks.

The lockout's immediate impacts were a memo from MLB to clubs freezing signings, the cancellation of next week's annual winter meetings in Orlando, Florida, and banishing players from team workout facilities and weight rooms while perhaps chilling ticket sales for 2022.

The union demanded change following anger over a declining average salary, middle-class players forced out by teams concentrating payroll on the wealthy and veterans jettisoned in favor of lower-paid youth, especially among clubs tearing down their rosters to rebuild.

"As players we see major problems with it," New York Mets pitcher Max Scherzer said of the 2016 agreement. "First and foremost, we see a competition problem and how teams are behaving because of certain rules that are within that, and adjustments have to be made because of that in order to bring out the competition."

Eleven weeks remain until pitchers and catchers are to report for spring training on Feb. 16, leaving about 70 days to reach a deal allowing for an on-time start. Opening day is set for March 31, and a minimum of three weeks of organized workouts have been required in the past.

Management, intent on preserving salary restraints gained in recent decades, rejected the union's requests for what teams regarded as significant alterations to the sport's economic structure, including lowering service time needed for free agency and salary arbitration.

"We offered to establish a minimum payroll for all clubs to meet for the first time in baseball history; to allow the majority of players to reach free agency earlier through an age-based system that would eliminate any claims of service time manipulation; and to increase compensation for all young players," Manfred wrote. "When negotiations lacked momentum, we tried to create some by offering to accept the universal designated hitter, to create a new draft system using a lottery similar to other leagues."

Many clubs scrambled to add players ahead of the lockout, committing to more than \$1.9 billion in new contracts — including a one-day record of more than \$1.4 billion Wednesday.

Two of the eight members of the union's executive subcommittee signed big deals: Texas infielder Marcus Semien (\$175 million) and Scherzer (\$130 million).

"This is actually kind of fun," Scherzer said. "I'm a fan of the game, and to watch everybody sign right now, to actually see teams competing in this kind of timely fashion, it's been refreshing because we've seen freezes for the past several offseasons."

No player remains active from the 232-day strike that cut short the 1994 season, led to the first cancellation of the World Series in 90 years and caused the following season to start late.

The average salary dropped from \$1.17 million before the strike to \$1.11 million but then resumed its seemingly inexorable rise. It peaked at just under \$4.1 million in 2017, the first season of the latest CBA,

but likely will fall to about \$3.7 million when this year's final figures are calculated.

That money is concentrated heavily at the top of the salary structure. Among approximately 1,955 players who signed major league contracts at any point going into the regular season's final month, 112 had earned \$10 million or more this year as of Aug. 31, of which 40 made at least \$20 million, including prorated shares of signing bonuses.

There were 1,397 earning under \$1 million, of which 1,271 were at \$600,000 or less and 332 under \$100,000, a group of younger players who shuttle back and forth to the minors.

A union statement claimed the lockout "was specifically calculated to pressure players into relinquishing rights and benefits, and abandoning good-faith bargaining proposals that will benefit not just players, but the game and industry as a whole. ... We have been here before, and players have risen to the occasion time and again — guided by a solidarity that has been forged over generations."

The union has withheld licensing money, as it usually does going into bargaining; cash, U.S. Treasury securities and investments totaled \$178.5 million last Dec. 31, according to a financial disclosure form filed with the U.S. Department of Labor.

Some player agents have speculated that management's credit lines already may be pressured following income deprivation caused by the coronavirus pandemic, but the clubs' finances are more opaque publicly than that of the union, making it difficult to ascertain comparative financial strength to withstand a lengthy work stoppage.

Manfred succeeded Bud Selig as commissioner in 2015 following a quarter-century as an MLB labor negotiator. He was unusually critical publicly of the union's stance.

"They never wavered from collectively the most extreme set of proposals in their history," he said, "including significant cuts to the revenue-sharing system, a weakening of the competitive balance tax, and shortening the period of time that players play for their teams. All of these changes would make our game less competitive."

Blum reported from New York and Hawkins from Irving, Texas.

AP Sports Writer Will Graves contributed to this report.

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

Lebanese businesses pay steep price for standoff with Saudis

By SARAH EL DEEB Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — A Lebanese DJ was days away from moving to Riyadh to play for a month in one of the newest entertainment centers in Saudi Arabia's capital when a brief, polite Whatsapp message informed her that the contract won't go through.

The head of a Beirut-based communications agency had been negotiating to revive a two-year-old contract derailed by the pandemic for hundreds of thousands of dollars. After two days of silence her Saudi client, in an apologetic call, said now is not the time.

A business owner who for years exported stationary to the kingdom had to return 20 containers of notebooks and paper ready for shipping to his warehouse outside of Beirut. "Please freeze everything," Ziad Bekdache recalled the handlers telling him.

These are some of the victims of Saudi Arabia's furious backlash against Lebanon in October after a Lebanese minister criticized its war against Iran-backed rebels in Yemen.

At the root of the crisis is a years-old regional rivalry with Iran, and Saudi unease about the increasing clout of Lebanon's Iran-backed Hezbollah group. Lebanon is caught in the middle.

In response to the minister's comments, Saudi Arabia recalled its ambassador and banned Lebanese imports ranging from chocolate to chemical products, which used to bring in about \$240 million a year.

The diplomatic crisis is causing anxiety among Lebanese, particularly those who work in Gulf countries,

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at a time when Lebanon is already enduring an unprecedented economic meltdown.

"I felt bad, not just for my part, but for my country and for the expats," said DJ Chloe. "We all have families abroad."

Remittances from more than 350,000 Lebanese working and living in the Gulf have been essential, particularly as the meltdown drives up inflation and unemployment in the once middle-income country. The World Bank said remittances of over \$6.2 billion, mostly from Gulf countries, made up 18.9% of Lebanon's GDP in 2020, one of the highest in the world.

While the dollar value of exports to Saudi Arabia has declined in past years, the kingdom had been a top importer of Lebanese products, including soap, printed books and some canned food.

Lebanese government officials have tried to defuse the crisis, saying Information Minister George Kor-dahi's comments, made before he assumed the post, did not represent their views.

Meanwhile, Kuwait, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates also recalled their ambassadors and, like the Saudis, asked Lebanese diplomats to leave, ushering in one of the coldest spells in diplomatic relations between those Gulf nations and Lebanon.

Relations had been souring for a while.

In 2013, hundreds of Lebanese Shiites working in the Gulf were expelled on suspicion they supported Hezbollah. The deportations came after the group joined the civil war in Syria on the side of President Bashar Assad, also backed by Iran.

Gulf nations have since imposed sanctions on Hezbollah, labeling it a terrorist group.

In 2017, Riyadh forced Lebanon's then-Prime Minister Saad Hariri to announce his resignation during a visit to the kingdom, citing Hezbollah's domination in a televised statement. The dramatic move backfired: Hariri returned home and restored his alliance with Hezbollah, losing Saudi backing.

As Lebanon's financial crisis unfolded in 2019, Saudi Arabia was absent after having spent more than \$6 billion between 2004 and 2015 in investments and government support in Lebanon, according to Saudi estimates.

The deadlock over forming a government was prolonged because Riyadh either backed no one or refused to back Hariri again.

Earlier this year, Saudi Arabia stepped up the pressure, widening the net. It prevented Lebanese produce from reaching or transiting through the kingdom after accusing Hezbollah of using shipments to smuggle drugs. It was a blow to farmers who relied mostly on the Gulf to market their goods.

Saudi businesses signaled the boycott was even wider.

Ajlan al-Ajlan, chair of the Council of Saudi Chambers, said all business relations, including Saudi investors working in Lebanon, would be suspended.

"This is the least the Saudi businessmen and companies can offer to support their government," he said according to the Saudi-owned Asharq al-Awsat newspaper.

Some argued that the Saudi measures amounted to collective punishment that effectively empowered Iran and its allies.

Ziad Nasreddine, an economist whose views align with those of Hezbollah, said Gulf businesses withdrawing from Lebanon open the doors for alternative investors.

"Heading east is one of those alternatives," he said, referring to China, Russia, Iran and Iraq.

But some of those with Saudi business ties are paying a steep price.

DJ Chloe said a Riyadh-based Lebanese company that negotiated with her and other Lebanese artists to perform in one of the Saudi capital's glitzy entertainment centers lost its entire contract.

The message from Riyadh — "Kindly accept my apologies" — signaled that priorities of hiring Lebanese have changed, she said.

Nayla el-Khoury's Beirut-based communications agency worked with Saudi firms for over a decade and had hoped to revive a pandemic-delayed entertainment project when her Saudi client froze it.

"This was supposed to put food on the table for 40 people," she said and angrily tweeted it at the Lebanese information minister.

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El-Khoury blamed Lebanese politicians for dragging the public into a fight that is not theirs. "I am getting punished for the involvement of parties in wars that I don't get an opinion about," she said.

The Saudi measures are threatening to dismantle what remains of a manufacturing base in Lebanon. A banking crisis has already forced many businesses to downsize and fuel shortages made Lebanon one of the most expensive countries for producing electricity.

Georges Nasraoui, acting head of the Association of Lebanese Industrialists, said at least 15 factories from the group's 900 members have transferred operations to neighboring countries in recent months. More are considering moving, putting more jobs at risk.

Imports from Saudi Arabia were also impacted.

Fadi Abboud, owner of Lebanon's General Packaging Industries and a former minister, said a recurrent order for polypropylene from one of Saudi Arabia's largest petrochemical factories was delayed. Then new orders were halted.

"What do they want us to do now? Go buy petrochemicals from Iran?" said Abboud, adding that he may be forced to relocate.

Bekdache, owner of Oriental Paper Products, a nearly 70-year-old family business, was planning to increase his exports to Saudi Arabia to benefit from the collapse of Lebanon's currency that made his notebooks more competitive. He is now considering moving the business away from Lebanon.

He said it's sad that after years of mutual cooperation and investments, "we get this boycott."

"It is as if they are boycotting their brothers."

Associated Press writer Aya Batrawy contributed from Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

Report: Israel failed to probe shootings at Gaza protests

By JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Rights groups said Thursday that Israel failed to investigate shootings that killed more than 200 Palestinians and wounded thousands at violent protests along the Gaza frontier in recent years, strengthening the case for the International Criminal Court to intervene.

The Israeli military rejected the findings, saying the "mass riots" organized by Gaza's militant Hamas rulers were aimed at providing cover for cross-border attacks. The military said alleged abuses were thoroughly investigated, with soldiers held accountable.

Beginning in March 2018, Gaza activists organized weekly protests that were initially aimed at highlighting the plight of Palestinian refugees from what is now Israel, who make up three-fourths of Gaza's population of more than 2 million people.

But Hamas, the Islamic militant group that rules Gaza, soon co-opted the protests and used them to push for the easing of the Israeli-Egyptian blockade imposed on the territory when it seized power from rival Palestinian forces in 2007.

Every week for around 18 months, thousands of Palestinians gathered at different points along the frontier, often after being bused there by Hamas. Groups of protesters burned tires, hurled stones and firebombs, and tried to breach the security fence.

Israeli snipers fired live ammunition, rubber-coated bullets and tear gas from sand berms on the other side in what Israel said was self-defense, to prevent thousands of Palestinians — including potentially armed Hamas operatives — from rushing into Israel.

Israeli fire killed at least 215 Palestinians, most of them unarmed, including 47 people under the age of 18 and two women, according to Gaza's Al-Mezan Center for Human Rights. Hundreds of others were seriously wounded in the demonstrations, which wound down in late 2019. Many were far from the border fence when they were shot.

An Israeli soldier was killed by a Palestinian sniper in 2018 and several others were wounded.

A report released Thursday by the Israeli rights group B'Tselem and the Gaza-based Palestinian Center for Human Rights said the military failed to investigate orders issued by senior commanders and took

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virtually no action against any soldiers.

As of April, out of 143 cases transferred to military prosecutors by an Israeli fact-finding mechanism, 95 were closed with no further action. Only one — the killing of a 14-year-old Palestinian — led to an indictment, with the remainder still pending, the report said. It cited figures obtained from the Israeli military through a freedom of information request.

The indicted soldier was convicted of “abuse of authority to the point of endangering life or health” in a plea bargain and sentenced to one month of community service, the report said.

That’s after more than 13,000 Palestinians were wounded over some 18 months of protests, including more than 8,000 hit by live fire. At least 155 required amputation, the report said. It said the military’s fact-finding mechanism only reviewed 234 cases in which Palestinians were killed, including some fatalities unrelated to the demonstrations.

The Israeli military issued a statement saying it carried out the investigations in a “thorough and in-depth manner” and filed indictments in two incidents in which soldiers were convicted and sentenced to “imprisonment during military service, probation and demotion.”

It said other cases are still pending “due to the complexity of the events and the need for an in-depth examination.” It said “dozens of incidents have been handled” since B’Tselem obtained its figures, which the military said were “outdated.”

The International Criminal Court launched an investigation earlier this year into potential war crimes committed by Israel and Palestinian militants in Gaza since 2014, when the two sides fought their third of four wars since Hamas seized power.

Israel has rejected the investigation, saying the court is biased against it and that Israel’s justice system is capable of conducting its own investigations that meet international standards. It says its security forces make every effort to avoid civilian casualties and investigate alleged abuses.

Israel is not a party to the ICC, but Israeli officials could be subject to arrest in other countries if it hands down warrants. Israel could potentially fend off the probe by proving it has launched credible investigations of its own.

B’Tselem and the PCHR say Israel has failed to meet those requirements.

Its investigations “consist entirely of the military investigating itself and have not examined the unlawful open-fire policy regulations handed down to security forces or the policies implemented during the protests,” they said.

“Instead, they focus exclusively on lower-ranking soldiers and on the question of whether they acted contrary to these illegal orders.”

Yuval Shany, a senior fellow at the Israel Democracy Institute and a member of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem Faculty of Law, said Israel could be vulnerable to ICC action over its response to the protests, but that the bar is relatively low for a country to prove it has investigated itself.

“It’s certainly not about actually prosecuting anyone. It’s really about genuinely investigating the incidents,” he said. That’s for prosecutors to determine, and it’s unclear whether Israel will cooperate with the court to try to prove its case.

There’s also the question of whether the prosecutors view Israel’s response to the protests as a law enforcement action or as an armed conflict with Hamas.

Israel has said Hamas activists were among the protesters, justifying its open-fire regulations in the context of long-running hostilities with the group.

“In the context of an armed conflict, you have greater latitude in applying lethal force toward militants,” Shany said. “If this is a law enforcement operation, then you have to basically use more restraint.”

Christmas tree buyers face reduced supplies, higher prices

By TERENCE CHEA Associated Press

ALAMEDA, Calif. (AP) — Even Christmas trees aren’t immune to the pandemic-induced shortages and inflation plaguing the economy.

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Extreme weather and supply chain disruptions have reduced supplies of both real and artificial trees this season. American shoppers should expect to have fewer choices and pay up to 30% more for both types this Christmas, industry officials said.

"It's a double whammy — weather and supply chain problems are really hampering the industry," said Jami Warner, executive director of the American Christmas Tree Association, an industry trade group. "Growers have been hard hit by floods, fires, smoke, drought, extreme weather conditions."

Record-breaking heat and wildfires in late June took a heavy toll on Christmas tree farms in Oregon and Washington, two of the nation's largest growers. Warner could not provide an estimate of how many fewer trees there will be this year but because it takes up to 10 years to grow, the crop loss will be felt for many seasons to come.

The shortage of truck drivers is making it harder and more expensive to transport live trees from farms to stores and tree lots.

Warner's advice: "Shop early. If you see something you like, buy it."

At Crystal River Christmas Trees, owner Dale Pine and his nephew Stacy Valenzuela struggled to get enough trees to sell at their tree lot in Alameda. Many of its suppliers in Oregon lost trees in the triple-digit heat wave.

"It was looking pretty grim for a while," Valenzuela said. "Every single day you're on the phone checking, 'Hey, you got anything? If you do, send it my way.' So a lot of work to get these trees on the ground this year."

Crystal River had to raise prices this year because the costs of trees, labor and truck delivery have all gone up, Valenzuela said.

Alameda resident Ian Steplowski came to Crystal River lot to buy a Silvertip tree with his wife and two young kids the day after Thanksgiving.

"We're having shortages of everything and of course it had to take Christmas trees," Steplowski said. "Definitely noticing everything's a bit more expensive this year already."

Teri Schaffert heard about the shortage of real trees this year, so she decided to buy an artificial tree for the first time. Almost a week before Thanksgiving, she went to shop at the Burlington showroom of Balsam Hill, which primarily sells its artificial trees online.

"I came in early because I heard in the news that there's not going to be enough fresh Christmas trees," said Schaffert, who lives in nearby San Mateo. Her husband isn't happy about the change. "What else can we do? I have to get ready for the future because I love Christmas. I love to decorate."

But the artificial tree industry is struggling with its own supply troubles as clogged ports and the lack of truckers delay shipments and raise costs, said Caroline Tuan, Balsam Hill's chief operating officer. The company's trees are about 20% more expensive this year and there is less variety.

"We have to bring our products over from our factories (in China), and that has been very challenging," Tuan said. "All of that has impacted us, which means that we have fewer trees to sell as an industry."

Worries about drought and drought led David Cruise and his wife to the Balsam Hill showroom to buy their first artificial tree this year.

"In the grand scheme of climate change here in California, this is really the way to go," said Cruise, who lives in Brentwood. "The sooner everybody gets on board with the artificial tree, the sooner everybody's going to enjoy it."

What's the status of the COVID-19 vaccine mandate in the US?

By TOM KRISHER Associated Press

What's the status of the COVID-19 vaccine mandate in the U.S.?

It's on hold indefinitely because of legal challenges, but employers can still require the shots.

To control the spread of COVID-19, President Joe Biden previously said businesses with 100 or more employees would need to require COVID-19 vaccination or have workers get tested weekly for the virus. The rule was to take effect Jan. 4, affecting about 84 million workers nationwide.

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But soon after the rule was issued by the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration, it faced multiple legal challenges from businesses, conservative groups and Republican attorneys general that said the agency doesn't have the authority to mandate vaccines.

On Nov. 6, a federal appeals court in New Orleans put the rule on hold, saying it was "a one-size fits-all sledgehammer" that was too broad. Ten days later, all challenges to the requirement were consolidated in another appeals court in Cincinnati.

In a court filing, lawyers for the Biden administration said the mandate was needed to reduce transmission of the virus in workplaces. It asked that it be allowed to move ahead with the rule.

The requirement for employers is among several challenges to Biden administration vaccine rules. Two other mandates, one for healthcare workers and one for federal contractors, are also being contested.

The AP is answering your questions about the coronavirus in this series. Submit them at: FactCheck@AP.org. Read more here:

Is travel safe during the pandemic this holiday season?

Why can't some COVID-19 vaccinated people travel to the US?

Can at-home COVID-19 tests make holiday gatherings safer?

AP: US military explosives vanish, emerge in civilian world

By KRISTIN M. HALL, JUSTIN PRITCHARD and JAMES LAPORTA Associated Press

The Marine Corps demolition specialist was worried — about America, and about the civil war he feared would follow the presidential election.

And so, block by block, he stole 13 pounds (6 kilograms) of C4 plastic explosives from the training ranges of Camp Lejeune.

"The riots, talk about seizing guns, I saw this country moving towards a scary unknown future," the sergeant would later write, in a seven-page statement to military investigators. "I had one thing on my mind and one thing only, I am protecting my family and my constitutional rights."

His crime might have gone undetected, but authorities caught a lucky break in 2018 as they investigated yet another theft from Lejeune, the massive base on coastal North Carolina. In that other case, explosives ended up in the hands of some high school kids.

These are not isolated cases. Hundreds — and possibly thousands — of armor-piercing grenades, hundreds of pounds of plastic explosives, as well as land mines and rockets have been stolen from or lost by the U.S. armed forces over the past decade, according to an ongoing Associated Press investigation into the military's failure to secure all its weapons of war. Still more explosives were reported missing and later recovered.

Troops falsified records to cover up some thefts, and in other cases didn't report explosives as missing, investigative files show. Sometimes, they failed to safeguard explosives in the first place.

The consequences can be deadly.

In August, an artillery shell exploded at a Mississippi recycling yard. Chris Smith had been taking a work break from the heat, drinking water and chewing tobacco. Suddenly he found himself cradling a co-worker who was bleeding profusely from his legs. The man died right there.

"For no reason at all," Smith said in an interview.

Two days later, an intact shell was found at the scrap yard. The local sheriff's department said the round was the kind used in a howitzer, a long-range artillery weapon.

Investigating authorities suspect the shells came from Camp Shelby, an Army National Guard base about 40 miles away. Mississippi National Guard spokeswoman Lt. Col. Deidre Smith said she knows of no evidence the shell originated there.

Metal salvaging thieves have targeted Shelby before, according to federal authorities. A man was injured by an explosion at his Gulfport, Mississippi, home in 2012 when he tried to open one of 51 AT-4 anti-tank shells taken from the impact area of Shelby's training range. Five people pleaded guilty to federal charges.

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Some thefts have drawn attention locally, as happened in 2019, when training rockets were found in residences just off Fort Hood in Texas. AP uncovered others that have not been reported publicly, among them the Camp Lejeune thefts and a 2013 case in which 36 sticks of unguarded TNT were stolen during a training exercise at Clark Air Base in the Philippines.

Military officials said thieves in the ranks are a small minority of service members and that — compared to stockpiles — the overall amounts of lost or stolen explosives are minuscule.

“We want to get the number to zero, so there is no loss, but it doesn’t mean that we don’t take seriously losses that happened,” Pentagon spokesman Lt. Col. Uriah Orland said.

Explosives have been found in homes and storage units, inside military barracks and alongside roads, even at a US-Mexico border checkpoint. These were not rusty war trophies cast out of grandpa’s attic. They came from military shipments or bases. Many were taken by military insiders.

The AP’s AWOL Weapons investigation has shown that poor accountability and insider thefts have led to the loss of more than 2,000 military firearms since 2010. Some guns were used in civilian crimes, found on felons or sold to a street gang.

In response, Congress is set to require that the military give lawmakers detailed loss and theft reports every year.

One thing those reforms won’t do: Make it harder to steal explosives such as C4.

Explosives are more difficult to account for than firearms.

While troops check guns in and out of armories, explosives are distributed from ammunition supply points with the presumption they will be detonated.

Although at least two people are supposed to sign consumption reports, it’s an honor system. If explosives are not used and vanish, only the thief might know. Explosives may not have individual serial numbers for tracking, and plastic explosives are easily concealed because, like Play-Doh, they can be cut or shaped.

Poor record-keeping and oversight allowed a private stationed at Quantico, Virginia, to steal cans of explosives and detonators. That criminal investigation also revealed that a second ammunition technician took four fragmentation grenades by falsely recording that they were exploded during training, an assertion no one questioned.

AP sought detailed data from all four service branches covering explosives loss or theft from 2010 through 2020.

The Army provided a chart that totaled nearly 1,900 entries for missing explosives, about half of which it said were recovered. The majority was described as C4/TNT. Other categories included artillery, mortars, land mines, grenades, rockets and armor-piercing 40 mm grenades shot from a launcher.

The chart represented a painstaking, manual records review, Army spokesman Lt. Col. Brandon Kelley said. Even with that review, researchers couldn’t always determine amounts, so for example it was not possible to know exactly how many pounds of C4/TNT were represented in the 1,066 entries, Kelley said.

In the broad context of the Army, Kelley said, amounts of missing explosives are negligible. Over the past decade, the Army “has maintained proper accountability of 99.999984% of munitions,” he said.

In response to a Freedom of Information Act request, the Marine Corps released data that was too unclear to calculate a precise tally. AP’s rough analysis showed that thousands of armor-piercing grenades and hundreds of pounds of plastic explosives were reported lost or stolen. “Some of it was later recovered and often these reports are attributed to human error, such as miscounts or improper documentation,” Capt. Andrew Wood said in a written statement. He wrote the Marines have “appropriate policies and procedures ... to account for explosives,” though the Corps is looking into improvements.

The Air Force provided a chart that reported about 50 pounds (23 kilograms) of C4, more than 800 feet (244 meters) of detonating cord and several dozen 40 mm armor-piercing grenades had vanished without being recovered. Spokeswoman Sarah Fiocco said the loss rate within the service’s \$25 billion explosives stockpile is a small fraction of a percent. “The Air Force does very well regarding accountability of explosives,” Fiocco wrote in response to questions.

The Navy said that only 20 hand grenades have been stolen, with all but two recovered. When the AP

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produced military investigative records showing an additional 24 grenades had been reported missing from a ship's armory in 2012, Navy spokesman Lt. Lewis Aldridge said the case was "beyond the 2-year local records retention requirement." Aldridge added: "We are committed to transparency and following proper procedures and take accountability of explosives seriously."

Not all missing explosives need to be reported all the way up the military's bureaucracy. These reporting gaps mean official loss and theft numbers collected by the Office of the Secretary of Defense undercount the problem's full extent. For example, the services don't have to tell the Pentagon about losses or thefts of less than 10 pounds of C4, although each branch can have more stringent internal regulations.

"The numbers are exceedingly small for loss of explosives," chief Pentagon spokesman John Kirby told AP in June.

The AP also unearthed dozens of explosives investigations by the Naval Criminal Investigative Service, Army Criminal Investigation Command and Defense Criminal Investigative Service. In the majority of these 63 cases, the military didn't realize any explosives were gone until someone recovered them where they shouldn't be.

That's what happened in 2018, when a former Marine's father tipped off investigators about his son's Colorado home. Authorities discovered four blocks of C4 stuffed into the son's boots and, in his hoodie pocket, cord to detonate them. They also found eight 40 mm armor-piercing grenades, court records show.

The items came from Naval Submarine Base Kings Bay in Georgia. The former Marine had been part of a security force guarding the nuclear-powered fleet there.

At Kings Bay, while one Marine altered paperwork to make it appear explosives had been used, others took them away after burying them near a "shoot house" on base, the records show.

That case spawned a parallel investigation into further explosive thefts from Kings Bay. According to the investigative file, 50 pounds (23 kilograms) of plastic explosives were stolen. In trained hands, much less C4 than that would be deadly if detonated close to people, and could destroy vehicles or damage bridges or buildings, military and civilian explosive experts said.

In all, six people pleaded guilty.

Former military members who take explosives don't always face punishment.

In 2016, a Pennsylvania man who had retired from the Marines as a lieutenant colonel two decades before was found with 10 pounds (5 kilograms) of C4, detonating cord and blasting caps, in his home. A federal prosecutor declined the case, citing the statute of limitations and the apparent lack of criminal intent.

In Florida, a former Army Special Forces soldier was acquitted by a civilian jury of taking boxes of TNT, grenades and dynamite. He testified that his supervising officer allowed him to take the explosives from Fort Bragg, North Carolina — a claim the supervisor denied.

The Army didn't know the explosives had been missing for years. At trial, an Army expert suggested a faked form said they had been exploded.

The story of the recovery of Camp Lejeune's purloined explosives begins with teenagers breaking into a vacant house.

On a shelf in a bedroom closet, they found a black backpack, and inside was an ammunition can that contained a cornucopia of munitions. Five feet of detasheet, a thin, malleable explosive that comes in rolls like wrapping paper. Fuse cord. Blasting caps. Parts of a land mine.

A Marine sergeant named Alex Krasovec had left the backpack, according to the investigative file. As a demolition instructor at Camp Lejeune in early 2017, he grabbed the can at the end of one training exercise. The items inside should have been exploded.

Sometimes, troops will gather the leftovers from a training and blow them up, rather than turning them back in — and filling out additional forms. It's known as a junk shot, safety shot or clean-up shot.

Instead of returning the explosives, or blowing up the can, Krasovec took it.

Krasovec, who declined an interview request from AP, would tell Naval Criminal Investigative Service agents that his idea was to go to his family home in Ohio — to have some fun, maybe blow up some tree stumps. Before he could, the teenagers who had slipped out of a sleepover in Jacksonville, North

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Carolina, found the stash. They took it, and kept it, until one of them was overheard talking about having military explosives at home.

A forensic lab identified Krasovec's fingerprints on the explosives. In questioning him about a year later, NCIS agents stumbled upon a second insider, Sgt. Travis Glosser.

As a demolition trainer at Camp Lejeune, Glosser also had exceptional access to C4.

During the summer of 2016, Glosser feared Hillary Clinton would beat Donald Trump in the presidential election, and society might disintegrate. So he began accumulating leftovers until he had what he described as "a respectable amount" of C4 — 10 blocks, weighing nearly 13 pounds (6 kilograms).

"I mean, you know how crazy the world is nowadays," Glosser told an NCIS agent in June 2018, when he surrendered. "So it's like well, you know, I've also got that just in case if the world does start coming to an end or anything crazy like that, I could protect me and my family."

After Trump won, he carefully buried the explosives just beyond the tree line in the backyard of his home off Camp Lejeune. They remained there until, more than a year later, word began circulating that Krasovec was in trouble and there would be an inventory review.

Glosser first told investigators on the Krasovec case that he didn't know about any stolen C4.

Before sunrise the next morning, he used a military shovel to bury the explosives in nearby woods. He then went to the gym, and reported to work.

Later that day, consumed by the mistake he knew he'd made, Glosser confessed, then told bomb handlers where he had buried the munitions.

Both Krasovec and Glosser pleaded guilty to theft of military property. Each was sentenced to less than two years of confinement in military prison, and both were knocked down in rank. Krasovec was booted from the service with a bad conduct discharge; Glosser is appealing his case.

Glosser's wife told the AP that he would not comment. Under questioning from authorities, he insisted he never planned to wreak havoc and said he had no ties to a militia.

"At no time did I ever intend or even think about selling, giving, or even showing anyone" the explosives, he wrote. "I also have never had any intent to harm anyone."

Hall reported from Nashville, Tennessee; contact her at <https://twitter.com/kmhall>. Pritchard reported from Los Angeles; contact him at <https://twitter.com/JPritchardAP>. LaPorta reported from Boca Raton, Florida; contact him at <https://twitter.com/JimLaPorta>. Contributing were Justin Myers in Chicago; Stacey Plaisance in Ellisville, Mississippi; Jennifer Farrar in New York and Robert Bumsted in Fort Polk, Louisiana.

Email AP's Global Investigations Team at investigative@ap.org or via <https://www.ap.org/tips/>. See other work at <https://www.apnews.com/hub/ap-investigations>.

Michigan teen, 15, charged in Oxford High School shooting

By COREY WILLIAMS and ED WHITE Associated Press

OXFORD TOWNSHIP, Mich. (AP) — The parents of a teenager accused of killing four students at a Michigan school were summoned to discuss his behavior just a few hours before the violence, a sheriff said.

The disclosure was made Wednesday as Ethan Crumbley, 15, was charged as an adult with two dozen crimes, including murder, attempted murder and terrorism for a shooting Tuesday at Oxford High School in Oakland County.

"He deliberately brought the handgun that day with the intent to murder as many students as he could," assistant prosecutor Marc Keast said while successfully arguing for no bail for Crumbley and a transfer to jail from a juvenile facility.

No motive was offered. But prosecutor Karen McDonald said the shooting was premeditated, based on a "mountain of digital evidence" against Crumbley.

Investigators found that he had recorded a video the night before the bloodshed in which he discussed killing students, Lt. Tim Willis of the sheriff's office said.

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"This was not just an impulsive act," McDonald told reporters.

During his arraignment, Crumbley replied, "Yes, I do," when asked if he understood the charges. Defense attorney Scott Kozak entered a plea of not guilty.

Earlier, Sheriff Mike Bouchard told reporters that Crumbley's parents were called to the school Tuesday "for behavior in the classroom that was concerning." The teen remained in school, however, and the shooting occurred a few hours later.

Bouchard didn't say what had worried school officials. He said investigators believe the gun was already in the 1,700-student school.

"There is nothing that he could have faced that would warrant senseless, absolutely brutal violence on other kids," the sheriff said, noting that Crumbley had an additional 18 rounds of ammunition when he was arrested.

In court, Keast said Crumbley entered a bathroom with a backpack and came out with a semi-automatic handgun, firing at students while moving down the hallway. The four students who were killed were 16-year-old Tate Myre, 14-year-old Hana St. Juliana and Madisyn Baldwin and Justin Shilling, both 17.

Three students were in hospitals Wednesday night, including a 17-year-old girl in critical condition, the sheriff's office said. Others who were injured were discharged.

Deputies rushed to the school around lunchtime Tuesday and captured Crumbley within minutes of the shooting. His father bought the 9 mm Sig Sauer gun last week, according to the sheriff.

It was the deadliest school shooting since the Santa Fe, Texas, High School massacre in 2018, according to The Associated Press/USA TODAY/Northeastern University Mass Killings database. The U.S. has had 31 mass killings this year of which 28 involved firearms.

McDonald said charges were being considered against Crumbley's parents.

"Owning a gun means securing it properly and locking it and keeping the ammunition separate," she said.

The shooting should be a wake-up call for new gun laws in a country that has become "desensitized to school shootings," McDonald told reporters.

"We have to do better," the prosecutor said without offering specific changes. "How many times does this have to happen? How many times?"

She also said the terrorism charge is appropriate in this case.

"What about all the children who ran, screaming, hiding under desks? ... Those are victims, too, and so are their families and so is the community," McDonald said.

Video posted on social media showed students rushing to get out of first-floor classroom windows rather than open a door to someone who claimed to be a police officer. Bouchard said he likely was a detective.

After the 2016 presidential election, Crumbley's mother wrote an open letter to Donald Trump as a blog post. It suggested school trouble, financial struggles, resentments — but also hope for the future.

Jennifer Crumbley said she was skipping car insurance payments to hire a tutor to help her son, who was 10 at the time. She blamed the "common core" curriculum used by teachers.

"My son struggles daily, and my teachers tell me they hate teaching it but they have to," Jennifer Crumbley wrote.

She also celebrated her right to own a gun, referring to her job as a real estate agent.

"As a female and a Realtor, thank you for allowing my right to bear arms. Allowing me to be protected if I show a home to someone with bad intentions," she wrote. "Thank you for respecting that Amendment."

Associated Press journalists Mike Householder in Pontiac, Mich., Bernard Condon in New York and Kathleen Foody in Chicago contributed to this report. AP researcher Rhonda Shafner in New York also contributed.

Japan retracts new flight bookings ban after criticisms

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Japan says it has retracted a ban on new incoming international flight bookings to defend against the new variant of the coronavirus only a day after the policy was announced, following criticisms

that it was an overreaction.

The transport ministry on Wednesday issued a request to international airlines to stop taking new reservations for flights coming into Japan until the end of December as an emergency precaution to defend against the new omicron variant.

The ministry said Thursday it has retracted the request after receiving criticisms that the ban was too strict and tantamount to abandoning its own people.

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said the quick reversal of the policy took into consideration Japanese nationals' traveling needs. Kishida has been pushing to take strong precautionary measures after his predecessor Yoshihide Suga virtually lost his leadership position amid public criticism that his virus measures were too limited and too slow.

"I have instructed the transport ministry to fully pay attention to the needs of Japanese citizens to return home," Kishida said.

The request had aimed to reduce Japan's daily international arrivals to 3,500 from an earlier level of 5,000 to tighten border controls as the new variant spread around the world, officials said.

"The request, issued as an emergency precaution, triggered confusion," Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno told reporters Thursday. He said the transport ministry has retracted the request for a uniformed stoppage on new bookings.

But a limit remains in place because the daily cap of 3,500 arrivals is being maintained. New bookings can be made as long as there is room under this cap, said transport ministry official Hitoshi Inoue.

Japan has already banned entry of foreign nationals from around the world, except for spouses of Japanese nationals, those with permanent residency permits and others subject to special considerations.

Japan has reported two cases of the omicron variant, which was first reported in South Africa last week.

Japan had been easing social and economic restrictions after infections rapidly slowed since September.

The booking ban request was a disappointment for many people who were planning trips during the holiday season, including Japanese citizens living overseas hoping to return home for the New Year period.

Many on social media criticized the measure as too strict, and one user compared it to Japan's feudal-era national isolation policy.

Much remains unknown about the new variant, including whether it is more contagious, as some health authorities suspect, whether it makes people more seriously ill, and whether it can thwart the vaccine.

Jan. 6 panel votes to hold former DOJ official in contempt

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House panel investigating the Jan. 6 U.S. Capitol insurrection voted Wednesday to pursue contempt charges against Jeffrey Clark, a former Justice Department official who refused to answer the committee's questions — but the panel agreed to let him come back for another try.

The committee voted 9-0 to pursue criminal charges against Clark, who aligned with Donald Trump ahead of the violent attack as the then-president tried to overturn his election defeat. Clark appeared for a deposition last month but refused to be interviewed, citing Trump's legal efforts to block the committee's investigation.

The Democratic chairman of the Jan. 6 panel, Mississippi Rep. Bennie Thompson, said it had received a last-minute notification from Clark's lawyer that he now wants to invoke his Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination. Thompson said the lawyer had offered "no specific basis for that assertion" and "no facts that would allow the committee to consider it," but the committee will give Clark a second chance at a deposition scheduled for Saturday.

"This is, in my view, a last-ditch attempt to delay the Select Committee's proceedings," Thompson said. "However, a Fifth Amendment privilege assertion is a weighty one. Even though Mr. Clark previously had the opportunity to make these claims on the record, the Select Committee will provide him another chance to do so."

Thompson said the committee was still proceeding with the contempt vote "as this is just the first step

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of the contempt process.”

The recommendation of criminal contempt charges against Clark will now go to the full House for a vote, though that is expected to be delayed until after the Saturday deposition. If the House votes to hold Clark in contempt, the Justice Department will then decide whether to prosecute.

Republican Rep. Liz Cheney of Wyoming, the panel’s vice chairwoman, said the committee would consider accepting Clark’s assertion of his Fifth Amendment rights if Clark says he believes that answering questions about his interactions with Trump and others could incriminate him.

“It is important to note, however, that Mr. Clark is not excused from testifying simply because President Trump is trying to hide behind inapplicable claims of executive privilege,” Cheney said.

Trump, who told his supporters to “fight like hell” the morning of Jan. 6, has sued to block the committee’s work and has attempted to assert executive privilege over documents and interviews, arguing that his private conversations and actions at the time should be shielded from public view. As the current officeholder, President Joe Biden has so far rejected Trump’s claims.

In a transcript of Clark’s aborted Nov. 5 interview released by the panel Tuesday, staff and members of the committee attempted to persuade the former Justice Department official to answer questions about his role as Trump pushed the department to investigate his false allegations of widespread fraud in the election. Clark had become an ally of the former president as other Justice officials pushed back on the baseless claims.

But Clark’s attorney, Harry MacDougald, said during the interview that Clark was protected not only by Trump’s assertions of executive privilege but also by several other privileges MacDougald claimed Clark should be afforded. The committee rejected those arguments, and MacDougald and Clark walked out of the interview after around 90 minutes of discussions.

According to a report earlier this year by the Senate Judiciary Committee, which interviewed several of Clark’s colleagues, Trump’s pressure on the Justice Department culminated in a dramatic White House meeting at which the president ruminated about elevating Clark to attorney general. He did not do so after several aides threatened to resign.

Despite Trump’s false claims about a stolen election — the primary motivation for the violent mob that broke into the Capitol and interrupted the certification of Biden’s victory — the results were confirmed by state officials and upheld by the courts. Trump’s own attorney general, William Barr, said in December 2020 that the Justice Department found no evidence of widespread fraud that could have changed the results.

Thompson wrote in Clark’s subpoena that the committee’s probe “has revealed credible evidence that you attempted to involve the Department of Justice in efforts to interrupt the peaceful transfer of power” and his efforts “risked involving the Department of Justice in actions that lacked evidentiary foundation and threatened to subvert the rule of law.”

Lawmakers on the Jan. 6 panel have vowed to hold any witness who doesn’t comply in contempt as they investigate the worst attack on the Capitol in two centuries. On Wednesday, Thompson said Clark has left them with no other choice.

“He chose this path,” Thompson said. “He knew what consequences he might face if he did so. This committee and this House must insist on accountability in the face of that sort of defiance.”

The Justice Department has signaled it is willing to pursue the committee’s contempt charges, indicting longtime Trump ally Steve Bannon earlier this month on two counts of criminal contempt.

Attorney General Merrick Garland said then that Bannon’s indictment reflects the department’s “steadfast commitment” to the rule of law after Bannon outright defied a subpoena from the committee and refused to cooperate.

Clark’s case could be more complicated since he did appear for his deposition and, unlike Bannon, was a Trump administration official on Jan. 6. But members of the committee argued that Clark had no basis to refuse questioning, especially since they intended to ask about some matters that didn’t involve direct interactions with Trump and wouldn’t fall under the former president’s claims of executive privilege.

The committee had also considered a seeking contempt against a third witness, former White House

Chief of Staff Mark Meadows, but held off this week after Meadows agreed to cooperate with the panel on a limited basis. The former Republican congressman from North Carolina has now provided some documents to the panel and is expected to sit for a deposition as soon as next week, though his lawyer has indicated he will decline to answer specific questions about his conversations with the president.

Thompson said Meadows has provided documents to the panel and will soon be interviewed, but the committee "will continue to assess his degree of compliance."

Associated Press writer Eric Tucker contributed to this report.

Justices signal they'll OK new abortion limits, may toss Roe

By MARK SHERMAN and JESSICA GRESKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — In the biggest challenge to abortion rights in decades, the Supreme Court's conservative majority on Wednesday signaled they would allow states to ban abortion much earlier in pregnancy and may even overturn the nationwide right that has existed for nearly 50 years.

With hundreds of demonstrators outside chanting for and against, the justices led arguments that could decide the fate of the court's historic 1973 Roe v. Wade decision legalizing abortion throughout the United States and its 1992 ruling in Planned Parenthood v. Casey, which reaffirmed Roe.

The outcome probably won't be known until next June. But after nearly two hours of arguments, all six conservative justices, including three appointed by former President Donald Trump, indicated they would uphold a Mississippi law that bans abortion after 15 weeks of pregnancy.

At the very least, such a decision would undermine Roe and Casey, which allow states to regulate but not ban abortion up until the point of fetal viability, at roughly 24 weeks.

And there was also substantial support among the conservative justices for getting rid of Roe and Casey altogether. Justice Clarence Thomas is the only member of the court who has openly called for overruling the two cases.

Justice Brett Kavanaugh, a Trump appointee, asked whether the court would be better off withdrawing completely from the abortion issue and letting states decide.

"Why should this court be the arbiter rather than Congress, the state legislatures, state supreme courts, the people being able to resolve this?" Kavanaugh asked. "And there will be different answers in Mississippi and New York, different answers in Alabama than California."

Abortion would soon become illegal or severely restricted in roughly half the states if Roe and Casey are overturned, according to the Guttmacher Institute, a research organization that supports abortion rights. Legislatures in many Republican-led states are poised for action depending on the Supreme Court's ruling. On Wednesday the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit vacated previous rulings that had blocked a Tennessee law that included banning abortions once a fetal heartbeat is detected — about six weeks — and ordered a rehearing by the full court.

People of color and lesser means would be disproportionately affected, supporters of abortion rights say.

The court's three liberal justices said that reversing Roe and Casey would significantly damage the court's own legitimacy.

"Will this institution survive the stench that this creates in the public perception that the Constitution and its reading are just political acts?" Justice Sonia Sotomayor asked.

In unusually strong terms for a high-court argument, Justice Stephen Breyer warned his colleagues they "better be damn sure" before they throw away the established abortion decisions.

Public opinion polls show support for preserving Roe, though some surveys also find backing for greater restrictions on abortion.

Among the conservatives, Chief Justice John Roberts appeared most interested in a less sweeping ruling that would uphold the Mississippi law but not explicitly overrule Roe and Casey.

"That may be what they're asking for, but the thing at issue before us today is 15 weeks," Roberts said, alluding to Mississippi's call to overturn the broader cases in addition to upholding its own law.

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More than 90% of abortions are performed in the first 13 weeks of pregnancy, well before viability, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

About 100 patients per year get abortions after 15 weeks at the Jackson Women's Health Organization, Mississippi's lone abortion clinic. The facility does not provide abortions after 16 weeks.

Even upholding the 15-week ban would mean rejecting the decades-old viability line. Abortion rights supporters say that would effectively overturn Roe and leave no principled line for when abortions might be banned.

Justice Neil Gorsuch, another Trump appointee, suggested the lack of a rigorous alternative might be a reason to overrule Roe and Casey entirely.

"You emphasized that if 15 weeks were approved, then we'd have cases about 12 and 10 and 8 and 6, and so my question is, is there a line in there that the government believes would be principled or not," Gorsuch asked Solicitor General Elizabeth Prelogar, the Biden administration lawyer supporting the Mississippi clinic.

"I don't think there's any line that could be more principled than viability," Prelogar said.

Supporters of both sides in the abortion debate filled the sidewalk and street in front of the court, their dueling rallies audible even from inside the building. Opposing signs read such sentiments as "Her Body Her Choice" and "God Hates the Shedding of Innocent Blood." The court stepped up security measures, including closing off some streets around the building.

Perhaps in recognition of the gravity of the issue before them, the justices took the bench at 10 o'clock without any smiles or the private jokes they sometimes share.

The case came to a court with a 6-3 conservative majority that has been transformed by the justices named by Trump —Gorsuch, Kavanaugh and Amy Coney Barrett.

A month ago, the justices also heard arguments over a uniquely designed Texas law that has succeeded in getting around the Roe and Casey decisions and banned abortions in the nation's second-largest state after about six weeks of pregnancy. The legal dispute over the Texas law revolves around whether it can be challenged in federal court, rather than the right to an abortion.

The court has yet to rule on the Texas law, and the justices have refused to put it on hold while the matter is under legal review.

The Mississippi case poses questions more central to the abortion right. State Solicitor General Scott Stewart said Roe and Casey "haunt our country" and "have no basis in the Constitution."

He compared those decisions to Plessy v. Ferguson, the infamous Supreme Court ruling from 1896 that justified official segregation before it was overruled by Brown v. Board of Education 58 years later.

"We're running on 50 years of Roe. It is an egregiously wrong decision that has inflicted tremendous damage on our country and will continue to do so and take innumerable human lives unless and until this court overrules it," he said.

The Mississippi clinic argued that those two cases were correctly decided and have been relied on by women and their partners for nearly a half century, a point also made by Justice Elena Kagan.

The abortion decisions are "part of the fabric of women's existence in this country," she said.

Barrett approached the issue of women's reliance on the abortion rulings from a different vantage point. She suggested that so-called safe haven laws in all 50 states that allow mothers to relinquish parental rights mean women can't be forced into motherhood, which could limit employment and other opportunities.

"Why don't the safe haven laws take care of that problem?" she asked.

Barrett, with a long record of personal opposition to abortion, acknowledged the court still has to deal with the issue of forcing women to remain pregnant against their will.

She described such a pregnancy as "an infringement on bodily autonomy, you know, which we have in other contexts, like vaccines."

In its earlier rulings, the court has rooted the right to abortion in the section of the 14th Amendment that says states cannot "deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law."

Same-sex marriage and other rights, based on the same provision but also not explicitly mentioned in

the Constitution, could be threatened if Roe and Casey fall, the administration argues.

Abortion arguments normally would find people camped out in front of the court for days in the hope of snagging some of the few seats available to the public. But with the courthouse closed because of COVID-19, there was only a sparse audience of reporters, justices' law clerks and a handful of lawyers inside the courtroom.

If the court issues its decision in late June it will be a little more than four months before next year's congressional elections, and could become a campaign season rallying cry.

Associated Press writer Parker Purifoy contributed to this report.

Stacey Abrams launches 2nd campaign for Georgia governor

By JEFF AMY Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Stacey Abrams, the Georgia Democrat and leading voting rights activist, said Wednesday that she will launch another campaign to become the nation's first Black woman governor.

Without serious competition in a Democratic primary, the announcement could set up a rematch between Abrams and incumbent Republican Gov. Brian Kemp. Their 2018 contest was one of the most narrowly decided races for governor that year and was dominated by allegations of voter suppression, which Kemp denied.

Yet Abrams' strong showing convinced national Democrats that Georgia should no longer be written off as a GOP stronghold. Her performance and subsequent organization convinced Joe Biden to invest heavily in the state in 2020, and he became the first Democratic presidential candidate to capture it since 1992. The party later won a narrow Senate majority after victories in two Georgia special elections.

The 2022 governor's race will test whether those gains were a one-time phenomenon driven by discomfort with then-President Donald Trump or marked the beginning of a more consequential political shift in a rapidly growing and diversifying South. The Democratic loss in the Virginia governor's election could raise questions about whether Abrams' straightforwardly liberal approach can be effective in a national environment currently trending against the Democrats.

In a video announcing her candidacy, Abrams said "opportunity and success in Georgia shouldn't be determined by background or access to power."

Abrams said she would provide "leadership that knows how to do the job, leadership that doesn't take credit without also taking responsibility, leadership that understands the true pain that folks are feeling and has real plans. That's the job of governor, to fight for one Georgia, our Georgia."

Kemp said in a statement that Abrams was on a "never-ending campaign for power" in an attempt to become president, linking her to what he said was the "failed Biden agenda."

"Her far-left agenda of open borders, gun confiscation, high taxes, and anti-law enforcement policies don't reflect who we are as Georgians," Kemp said.

In a state where Democrats often sought — and failed — to win power by relying on Black voters and appealing to older white moderates, Abrams ran in 2018 as an unapologetic progressive. The 47-year-old Abrams embraced expanding Medicaid access, something a series of Republican governors have refused to do, and supported abortion rights.

Georgia remains narrowly divided, and voters often reject the president's party in the next election. But in abandoning nods at centrism, Abrams insists Democrats can attract new voters, including transplants to the booming Atlanta area, Black voters who hadn't participated in previous elections and younger, more liberal white voters.

Although Kemp defeated her by 1.4 percentage points, Abrams won 778,000 more votes than the previous Democrat to run for governor.

Abrams was defiant in the face of the 2018 loss, acknowledging Kemp as the victor but refusing to concede the race, citing "gross mismanagement" in his role as secretary of state overseeing the election. She accused Kemp of using his office to aggressively purge the rolls of inactive voters, enforce an "exact

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match" policy for checking voters' identities that left registrations in limbo and otherwise tilt the outcome in his favor.

Kemp has repeatedly denied any wrongdoing.

After the election, Abrams started Fair Fight, an organizing group that has raised more than \$100 million and built a statewide political operation that registered hundreds of thousands of new voters in Georgia. The state saw record-breaking turnout in the 2020 presidential race and January Senate runoff elections.

Now, Abrams and Kemp look like they may face a rematch in a new political climate. For one, Kemp faces opposition from Trump and his most loyal GOP supporters for not supporting the former president's baseless argument that he was cheated out of reelection through massive voter fraud, including in Georgia. Election officials conducted three recounts in the state, each of which affirmed Biden's victory.

Trump, who campaigned for Kemp in 2018, is now one of the governor's most vocal critics. The former president held a rally in the state in September, pointedly inviting former U.S. Sen. David Perdue to run against Kemp and sarcastically suggesting to the crowd that he would prefer Abrams to the incumbent governor.

"I'll beat her again, but it will be hard to do with Brian Kemp, because the MAGA base will just not vote for him ...," Trump said in statement. "But some good Republican will run, and some good Republican will get my endorsement, and some good Republican will WIN!"

Since the rally, Perdue has privately consulted with leading Republicans about a possible bid and suggested in a radio interview last month that "a lot of people feel like that people in power ... caved in to a lot of things back in 2020 that didn't have to be done," a reference to Kemp's refusal to overturn Biden's Georgia victory.

Kemp's disavowal of problems in Georgia's election results did not stop him from pushing through restrictive changes to voting laws in response to Trump's 2020 national defeat. Many Democrats are worried that Georgia's new law will erode Democratic chances. Others hope the new law will invigorate supporters and make them more determined to vote.

Abrams has used voting concerns to mobilize Democrats, telling The Associated Press in April that "Republicans are gaming the system because they're afraid of losing an election."

Republicans, meanwhile, have tried to use Abrams to galvanize their voters. Earlier this year, Kemp allies preemptively formed a group called Stop Stacey, aimed specifically at stopping her from winning the governorship in 2022.

Abrams faces vulnerabilities on several fronts. Her national stature could raise questions that she's more interested in higher office than in running Georgia. Republicans tried to blame her for Major League Baseball's decision to pull the All-Star Game out of Atlanta last year over backlash to the restrictive new voting law, though Abrams repeatedly discouraged boycotts.

Moving forward, she is part of a growing contingent of Black women seeking statewide office.

Democrat Deirdre DeJear is running for governor in Iowa. In Florida, Democratic Rep. Val Demings is running for Senate. In North Carolina, former state Sen. Erica Smith and former state Supreme Court Chief Justice Cheri Beasley are competing in the Democratic primary for Senate.

And in Virginia, Winsome Sears was elected lieutenant governor as a Republican.

But none has the national stature of Abrams.

Since 2018, Abrams was named to Time magazine's list of the world's 100 most influential people. She was featured in Vogue and interviewed on a podcast by the Duke and Duchess of Sussex. She wrote two books, including a legal thriller. She conducted a 12-city speaking tour. She considered a run for president in 2020 before deciding against it. When Biden became the nominee, she openly lobbied to be his running mate, a position that went to Kamala Harris.

Follow Jeff Amy on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/jeffamy>.

Biden says HIV/AIDS strategy needs to confront inequity

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By AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden on Wednesday unveiled his new HIV/AIDS strategy to end the more than 40-year-old epidemic, calling for a renewed focus on vulnerable Americans — including gay and bisexual Black and Latino men, who his administration says are too often stigmatized even as they are disproportionately affected.

The new strategy, which declares racism a “public health threat,” was released on the annual commemoration of World AIDS Day. It is meant to serve as a framework for how the administration shapes its policies, research, programs and planning over the next three years.

But Biden acknowledged that the country still needs to work to destigmatize HIV/AIDS and noted that LGBT and racial minority groups have “endured the brunt” of the epidemic that’s killed more than 36 million worldwide, including 700,000 Americans.

“I want to make sure that everyone in the United States knows their HIV status, and everyone with HIV receives high-quality care and treatment that they deserve and that we end the harmful stigma around HIV and AIDS,” Biden said.

The new strategy asserts that over generations “structural inequities have resulted in racial and ethnic health disparities that are severe, far-reaching, and unacceptable.”

Today’s HIV treatments not only can give people with the AIDS virus a near-normal life expectancy, they can make those patients less likely to infect other people. There are also medications that can help protect healthy people who are at risk from their infected sexual partners, a strategy known as “pre-exposure prophylaxis” or PrEP.

New HIV infections in the U.S. fell about 8% from 2015 to 2019. But Black and Latino communities — particularly gay and bisexual men within those groups — continue to be disproportionately affected, according to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data.

African Americans make up about 13% of the U.S. population but accounted for more than 40% of new infections. The Latino population accounted for nearly 25% of new infections but makes up about 18.5% of the U.S. population.

Historically, gay and bisexual men have been the most disproportionately affected group. They account for about 66% of new HIV infections, even though they are only 2% of the population, according to the CDC. In 2019, 26% of new HIV infections were among Black gay and bisexual men, 23% among Latino gay and bisexual men, and 45% among gay and bisexual men under the age of 35.

Disparities also persist among women. Black women’s HIV infection rate is 11 times that of white women and four times that of Latina women.

To reduce the disparities, the strategy includes calls for focusing on the needs of disproportionately affected populations, supporting racial justice, combating HIV-related stigma and discrimination and providing leadership and employment opportunities for people with or at risk for HIV.

Besides addressing racism’s impact on Americans battling the virus or at risk of contracting it, the new strategy also puts greater emphasis on harm reduction and syringe service programs, encourages reform of state laws that criminalize behavior of people with HIV for potentially exposing others and adds focus on the needs of the growing population of people with HIV who are aging.

Biden expressed disbelief that some states have laws on the book that criminalize spitting in public by HIV-positive people even though it has long been proven that the virus can’t be transmitted through saliva. Thirty-five states have laws that criminalize various forms of HIV exposure, according to the CDC

“We have to follow science and that means eliminating laws that perpetuate discrimination, exacerbate disparities, discourage HIV testing and take us further away from our goal,” Biden said.

Before the coronavirus outbreak, health officials were celebrating how new medicines and other developments had gradually tamed HIV, prompting then-President Donald Trump to announce in 2019 a campaign to “eliminate” the AIDS epidemic in the U.S. by 2030.

But researchers have expressed concerns that COVID-19 may have halted progress in the battle against HIV, with limited data collected by the CDC suggesting there was a large drop-off in HIV testing and other related services in early months of the pandemic.

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The CDC looked at data from a lab that handles about a quarter of the nation's HIV tests, comparing the numbers from March 13 through Sept. 30 last year with the same period the year before. The agency found there were 670,000 fewer HIV screening tests and about 4,900 fewer HIV diagnoses than normal. There also was a 21% national decline in prescriptions for PrEP.

The Biden administration recently announced it will host the Global Fund to Fight AIDS replenishment conference next year. The United States has contributed about \$17 billion to the fund, about a third of all donor contributions.

A giant red ribbon, a symbol of support for people living with HIV, was displayed on the North Portico of the White House to mark World AIDS Day. The two-story ribbon display has become an annual tradition at the White House since 2007.

Trump received praise from some public officials, including Dr. Anthony Fauci, the government's top infectious diseases expert, when he set the 2030 goal to eliminate the AIDS epidemic.

But as Biden marked his first World AIDS Day as president, he noted that his administration reestablished the White House Office of National AIDS Policy, an office that was eliminated during Trump's tenure. Trump also faced criticism during his time in office from some AIDS activists who said he did too little to address racism and the stigma faced by some most at risk of contracting HIV.

Biden praised former President George W. Bush, a Republican, for launching in 2003 the President's Emergency Plan For AIDS Relief, or PEPFAR, a global health initiative that is credited with saving more than 20 million lives.

He added that Bush's push for PEPFAR was "undeniable proof of the good that American leadership and innovation can achieve in the world when we commit to it."

Suspect in Waukesha parade carnage says he feels 'demonized'

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — The man accused of driving his SUV through a Christmas parade in suburban Milwaukee, killing six people and injuring dozens, said Wednesday that he feels like he's being "demonized."

Darrell Brooks Jr., in an interview with Fox News from the Waukesha County Jail, offered no details about a possible motive.

"I just feel like I'm being monster – demonized," Brooks said, according to the Fox report.

According to a criminal complaint, Brooks drove his SUV into the parade in Waukesha on Nov. 21. Witnesses said he was swerving and appeared to be intentionally trying to hit people. He was arrested minutes later as he stood on the porch of a nearby house asking the homeowner to help him call a ride.

Police said he had fled the scene of a domestic disturbance when he turned into the parade, although officers were not pursuing him at the time. He's been charged with six counts of first-degree intentional homicide.

Brooks' mother Dawn Woods, released a letter Wednesday offering the family's condolences to the victims.

She said her son has long suffered from mental health issues and after he became an adult he lacked the insurance and finances to continue his medication and counseling, leading him to commit crimes.

"Mental illness is real and the system is broken it can and must be fixed NOW, not next year or with a new legislation NOW. So many like Darrell that have fallen through the cracks because of a broken system that no one cared to address, can get the help they so desperately need," Woods wrote in the letter, first obtained by WDJT-TV.

At the time of the crash, Brooks was out on \$1,000 bail in a Milwaukee County case in which he is accused of intentionally striking a woman with his car. He was charged in that case on Nov. 5.

He's also a defendant in another Milwaukee County case from 2020 in which he's charged with shooting at his nephew and another person.

Michigan teen charged in Oxford High School shooting

By COREY WILLIAMS and ED WHITE Associated Press

OXFORD TOWNSHIP, Mich. (AP) — A 15-year-old boy was charged with murder and terrorism for a shoot-

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ing that killed four fellow students and injured more at a Michigan high school, authorities said Wednesday as they revealed additional details, including a meeting between troubled officials and his parents just a few hours before the bloodshed.

No motive was offered by Oakland County authorities, a day after violence at Oxford High School, roughly 30 miles (50 kilometers) north of Detroit. But prosecutor Karen McDonald said the shooting was premeditated, based on a "mountain of digital evidence" against Ethan Crumbley.

"This was not just an impulsive act," McDonald said.

Indeed, sheriff's Lt. Tim Willis told a judge that Crumbley recorded a video the night before the violence in which he discussed killing students.

Crumbley was charged as an adult with two dozen crimes, including murder, attempted murder and terrorism causing death. During his arraignment, he replied, "Yes, I do," when asked if he understood the charges. Defense attorney Scott Kozak entered a plea of not guilty.

"He deliberately brought the handgun that day with the intent to murder as many students as he could," assistant prosecutor Marc Keast said in successfully arguing for no bail for Crumbley and a transfer to jail from a juvenile facility.

Earlier, Sheriff Mike Bouchard told reporters that Crumbley's parents were called to the school Tuesday "for behavior in the classroom that was concerning." The teen remained in school, and the shooting occurred a few hours later.

Bouchard didn't disclose what had worried school officials. He said investigators believe the gun was already in school.

"There is nothing that he could have faced that would warrant senseless, absolutely brutal violence on other kids," the sheriff said, noting that Crumbley had an additional 18 rounds of ammunition when he was arrested.

In court, Keast said Crumbley entered a bathroom with a backpack and came out with a semi-automatic handgun, firing at students while moving down the hallway. The four students who were killed were 16-year-old Tate Myre, 14-year-old Hana St. Juliana, 17-year-old Madisyn Baldwin and 17-year-old Justin Shilling.

Deputies rushed to the school around lunchtime Tuesday and captured Crumbley within minutes of the shooting. His father bought the 9 mm Sig Sauer gun last week, according to the sheriff.

It was the deadliest school shooting since the Santa Fe, Texas, High School massacre in 2018, according to The Associated Press/USA TODAY/Northeastern University Mass Killings database. The U.S. has had 31 mass killings this year of which 28 involved firearms.

McDonald said charges were being considered against Crumbley's parents.

"Owning a gun means securing it properly and locking it and keeping the ammunition separate," she said.

The shooting should be a wake-up call for new gun laws in a country that has become "desensitized to school shootings," McDonald told reporters.

"We have to do better," the prosecutor said without offering specific changes. "How many times does this have to happen? How many times?"

She also said the terrorism charge fits.

"What about all the children who ran, screaming, hiding under desks? ... Those are victims, too, and so are their families and so is the community," McDonald said.

Video posted on social media showed students rushing to get out of first-floor classroom windows rather than open a door to someone who claimed to be a police officer. Bouchard said he likely was a detective.

After the attack, authorities learned of social media posts about threats of a shooting at the 1,700-student school. The sheriff stressed how crucial it is for such tips to be sent to authorities, while also cautioning against spreading social media rumors before a full investigation.

A concerned parent, Robin Redding, said her son, 12th-grader Treshan Bryant, stayed home Tuesday after hearing threats of a possible shooting.

"This couldn't be just random," she said.

After the 2016 presidential election, Crumbley's mother wrote an open letter to Donald Trump as a blog post. It suggested school trouble, financial struggles, resentments — but also hope for the future.

Jennifer Crumbley said she was skipping car insurance payments to hire a tutor to help her son, who was 10 at the time. She blamed the "common core" curriculum used by teachers.

"My son struggles daily, and my teachers tell me they hate teaching it but they have to," Jennifer Crumbley wrote.

She also celebrated her right to own a gun, referring to her job as a real estate agent.

"As a female and a Realtor, thank you for allowing my right to bear arms. Allowing me to be protected if I show a home to someone with bad intentions," she wrote. "Thank you for respecting that Amendment."

Associated Press journalists Mike Householder in Pontiac, Mich., Bernard Condon in New York and Kathleen Foody in Chicago contributed to this report. AP researcher Rhonda Shafner in New York also contributed.

Fossil footprints puzzle scientists: Bear or ancient human?

By CHRISTINA LARSON AP Science Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Prehistoric footprints that have puzzled scientists since the 1970s are getting a second look: Were they left by extinct animals or by human ancestors?

When famed paleontologist Mary Leakey first uncovered the footprints in Tanzania 40 years ago, the evidence was ambiguous.

Leakey focused her attention instead on other fossil footprints that could be more clearly linked to early humans. Those footprints, found at a site called Laetoli G, are the first clear evidence of early humans walking upright.

Decades later, a new team re-excavated the confusing footprints, found at a site called Laetoli A, and made photos and 3-D scans available for other researchers to continue the debate.

The research was published Wednesday in the journal *Nature*.

"These footprints have been in the mystery category for 40 years," said Rick Potts, who directs the Smithsonian Institution's Human Origins Project.

"It's a really exciting idea to re-exhume them and study them again," added Potts, who was not involved in the research.

What's long perplexed scientists is that those tracks — broad footprints with enlarged fifth toes and estimated to be around 3.7 million years old — don't closely match anything scientists have elsewhere identified.

"They didn't have the right weight and foot movement to be easily identified as human, so other explanations were sought," including that they may belong to an extinct species of bears, said co-author and Dartmouth paleoanthropologist Jeremy DeSilva.

He and other researchers returned to the site in 2019 and used Leakey's original maps to locate the enigmatic prints, preserved in a layer of volcanic ash that had cooled and hardened.

Co-author Ellison McNutt of Ohio University studied the foot mechanics of black bear cubs at a wildlife rescue center in New Hampshire to see whether a small bear walking on hind legs could leave similar footprints.

She held a tray of apple sauce to lure the cubs into walking toward her. Each footstep was recorded in a track of mud, to be analyzed.

Bears walking upright first put weight on the heels of their feet, like humans, she said. "But the foot proportions aren't the same." She concluded that the fossil footprints were not left by bears.

Other factors, such as the spacing of the footprints, led the study authors to conclude that the footprints were left by a previously unknown species of a very early human ancestor.

Not everyone is convinced.

Smithsonian's Potts said it's a toss-up between an ancient bear or an ancient human, adding that an ancient bear may have walked differently than a modern black bear.

William Harcourt-Smith, a paleoanthropologist at the American Museum of Natural History who was not involved in the research, said he was convinced that it wasn't a bear, but wasn't certain it was an early human.

"These prints could still belong to some form of non-human ape," he said.

If two different species were walking upright on the landscape at the same time, that suggests different simultaneous experiments in bipedalism — complicating the conventional view of human evolution as strictly linear.

"That's really cool to think about," said Harcourt-Smith.

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Who are the victims of Oxford High School shooting?

The four teenagers killed by a fellow student at Oxford High School in Michigan were being remembered Wednesday for their commitment to athletics, art and family.

Here's what we know about those killed during the shooting on Tuesday:

Madisyn Baldwin's grandmother told WDIV-TV that she was a talented artist who loved to draw, read and write.

The 17-year-old was the oldest child in her family, with a half-brother and two sisters. Her grandmother said she already had received multiple college acceptances and was looking forward to the future. She described her granddaughter as patient and "so kind."

Tate Myre, 16, was a member of the school's varsity football team and an honor student, according to the football team's tribute to him on Twitter.

"Tate was a great young man with a bright future and beloved by all," the post read. "You will be missed, Tate."

Myre frequently shared video highlights of his play during football games and recently retweeted a media interview following a playoff game win on a rainy evening. Reflecting on an 0-3 start to the season, he said the team worked hard and had to trust and love one another to recover.

"Rain is just like Oxford football, tough, muddy," he said, wearing the number 42 on his white jersey. "Everything about us is tough."

Brett Moore, 46, said his son, a sophomore at Oxford High School who played football with Myre, is taking his friend's death "very badly."

"Tate drove him home from practice every day and they went to homecoming together," said Moore, who teaches in Walled Lake schools. "He was a great kid."

Hana St. Juliana also was remembered for her passion and commitment to athletics.

The Oxford women's basketball program paid tribute to the 14-year-old St. Juliana on Twitter.

"We will never forget your kind heart, silly personality, and passion for the game," the team's post said. "Since 6th grade camp you have stayed dedicated to Oxford Basketball, soaking in the game. ... This season we play for you Hana."

Authorities on Wednesday announced that a fourth student died of his injuries that morning. They identified him as 17-year-old Justin Shilling.

Managers of a restaurant in nearby Lake Orion, Anita's Kitchen, said Shilling worked there — one of many employees who attended Oxford High School since they opened.

"Justin was an exemplary employee, a devoted friend and co-worker, co-captain of his bowling team, and simply a pleasure to be around," a message on the restaurant's Facebook page said. Another six unidentified students and a teacher were wounded.

Here are their ages and conditions as of Wednesday afternoon, according to the Oakland County Sheriff's Department:

- 14-year-old male, treated and released.
- 17-year-old female, stable.
- 15-year-old male, treated and released.
- 17-year-old male, treated and released.

- 47-year-old female teacher, treated and released.
- 14-year-old female, stable.
- 17-year-old female, critical.

News Researcher Rhonda Shafner contributed from New York.

Death of bullied Utah girl draws anger over suicides, racism

By BRADY McCOMBS Associated Press

DRAPER, Utah (AP) — When her 10-year-old daughter tried spraying air freshener on herself before school one morning, Brittany Tichenor-Cox suspected something was wrong with the sweet little girl whose beaming smile had gone dormant after she started the fifth grade.

She coaxed out of Isabella “Izzy” Tichenor that a boy in her class told her she stank after their teacher instructed the class that they needed to shower. It was the latest in a series of bullying episodes that targeted Izzy, who was autistic and the only Black student in class. Other incidents included harassment about her skin color, eyebrows and a beauty mark on her forehead, her mother said.

Tichenor-Cox informed the teacher, the school and the district about the bullying. She said nothing was done to improve the situation. Then on Nov. 6, at their home near Salt Lake City, Izzy died by suicide.

Her shocking death triggered an outpouring of anger about youth suicides, racism in the classroom and the treatment of children with autism — issues that have been highlighted by the nation’s racial reckoning and a renewed emphasis on student mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Utah, the suicide also intensified questions about the Davis School District, which was recently reprimanded by the Justice Department for failing to address widespread racial discrimination.

The district, where Black and Asian American students account for roughly 1% of the approximately 73,000 students, initially defended its handling of the bullying allegations but later launched an outside investigation that is ongoing.

“When I was crying out for help for somebody to do something, nobody even showed up for her,” Tichenor-Cox said this week in an interview with The Associated Press. “It just hurts to know that my baby was bullied all day throughout school — from the time I dropped her off to the time I picked her up.”

Being autistic made it difficult for Izzy to find words to express what she was feeling, but her mother sensed her daughter was internalizing the messages from school. She asked her mother to get rid of the beauty mark and shave her unibrow. Her mother told her those features made her different and beautiful. She told her mother her teacher didn’t like her and wouldn’t say hi or help with schoolwork.

Izzy’s mother, 31, blames the teacher for allowing the bullying to happen. Prior to this year, she said, Izzy and two of her other children liked the school.

Tichenor-Cox has also called out deep-rooted racism in the predominantly white state of Utah, where she said the N-word that kids called her when she was a child in the 1990s is still hurled at her children three decades later.

But she doesn’t want fury to be her only message. She vows to make Izzy’s life matter by speaking out about bullying, racism and the importance of understanding autism so that no other parent has to suffer like she is.

As she looked at a picture on her cellphone of Izzy smiling with fresh braids in her hair last May, Tichenor-Cox teared up as she realized that was her last birthday with her dear daughter who dreamed of being a professional dancer.

“No parent should have to bury their 10-year old,” she said. “I’m still in shock. ... This pushes me to get this out there like this. Mommy is pushing to make sure that this don’t happen to nobody else.”

Davis School District spokesman Christopher Williams declined to provide an exact timeline on the investigation, reveal the employment status of Izzy’s teacher or respond to any direct accusations.

He did say in a statement Wednesday that an independent investigative team is working “urgently” and that findings will be released when finished. In a previous statement from last month, when the district

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pledged to do an outside investigation, it said it would review its "handling of critical issues, such as bullying, to provide a safe and welcoming environment for all."

The Justice Department investigation uncovered hundreds of documented uses of the N-word and other racial epithets over the last five years in the district. The probe also found physical assaults, derogatory racial comments and harsher discipline for students of color.

Black students throughout the district told investigators about people referring to them as monkeys or apes and saying that their skin was dirty or looked like feces. Students also made monkey noises at their Black peers, repeatedly referenced slavery and lynching and told Black students to "go pick cotton" and "you are my slave," according to the department's findings.

The district has agreed to take several steps as part of a settlement agreement, including establishing a new department to handle complaints, offering more training and collecting data.

Tichenor-Cox told the AP she doesn't trust the district's investigation and said the district has zero credibility. Instead, her attorney, Tyler Ayres, hired a private investigator to do their own probe as Tichenor-Cox considers possible legal action.

She and Ayres also said the Justice Department is looking into what happened with Izzy. The agency would not say if it's investigating what happened to Izzy at the school but said in a statement Wednesday that it is saddened by her death and aware of reports she was harassed because of her race and "disability." The department said it is committed to ensuring the school district follows through on the plan established in the settlement agreement.

Youth suicides in Utah have leveled off in recent years after an alarming spike from 2011 to 2015, but the rate remains sharply higher than the national average. The state's 2020 per capita rate was 8.85 suicides among 10- to 17-year-olds per 100,000, compared with 2.3 suicides per 100,000 nationally in 2019, the latest year with data available.

Tributes to Izzy are scattered on social media under #standforizzy. The Utah Jazz basketball team honored her at a recent game, and players Donovan Mitchell and Joe Ingles, who has an autistic son, both expressed dismay over what happened, calling it "disgusting." Other parents from the school district have sent letters to the school board calling out the district's "dismissive actions."

Tichenor-Cox and her husband, Charles Cox, have five other children to focus on, so they're doing all they can to handle the grief while trying to remember the sparkle Izzy brought to their lives for a decade.

"I want her to be remembered of how kind she was, how beautiful she was, how brilliant she was and intelligent she was," Tichenor-Cox said. "Because if I keep thinking of what happened, it's just going to put me back, and I'm trying to be strong for her."

US reports 1st case of omicron variant in returning traveler

By ZEKE MILLER, OLGA R. RODRIGUEZ and MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — The U.S. recorded its first confirmed case of the omicron variant Wednesday — in a vaccinated traveler who returned to California after a trip to South Africa — as scientists around the world race to establish whether the new, mutant version of the coronavirus is more dangerous than previous ones.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the United States' top infectious-disease expert, announced the finding at the White House.

"We knew it was just a matter of time before the first case of omicron would be detected in the United States," he said.

The infected person was identified as a traveler who had returned from South Africa on Nov. 22, developed mild symptoms and tested positive for COVID-19 Monday. Researchers at the University of California, San Francisco obtained a sample from the patient Tuesday evening and worked feverishly overnight to assemble the genetic sequence.

The person, who had had the full two doses of the Moderna vaccine and wasn't yet due for a booster shot, is improving, California officials said.

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Fauci and other medical experts strongly emphasized that Americans should continue to get vaccinated and get their booster shots. The vaccine has been proven to reduce the risk of severe illness and death, and Fauci said it is reasonable to believe it will offer protection against the omicron variant.

The mild nature of the California person's infection "is a testimony to the importance of the vaccinations," said California Health Secretary Dr. Mark Ghaly.

All the individual's close contacts have been reached and have tested negative, officials said. The patient, who agreed to remain in quarantine, was identified only as being between 18 and 49.

California Gov. Gavin Newsom expressed confidence in the state's efforts to control the virus and said he does not anticipate imposing another stay-at-home order or other shutdown measures.

At least 23 other countries have reported omicron infections since South African authorities first identified the variant a week ago — an announcement that led the U.S. and many other nations to almost immediately bar airline travelers arriving from southern Africa.

In South Africa, new cases of COVID-19 nearly doubled in a single day to almost 8,600, authorities reported Wednesday, and the country's National Institute for Communicable Diseases said omicron has now overtaken the delta variant among samples now being analyzed at the genetic level.

But the variant is still surrounded by many unknowns, among them: Is it more contagious than other versions, as some scientists are beginning to suspect? Does it make people more seriously ill? And can it evade the vaccine?

"Any declaration of what will or will not happen with this variant, I think it is too early to say," Fauci said. European Union Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said it will take two to three weeks before it becomes fully clear what omicron can do to the world.

"This is, in normal times, a short period. In pandemic times, it's an eternity," she lamented.

In California, the genetic analysis of the patient's virus from UCSF was confirmed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"We will likely see this scenario play out multiple times across the country in the coming days or weeks," said Scott Becker, CEO of the Association of Public Health Laboratories.

"This particular case shows the system working as it was designed to work — an individual with travel history from South Africa, an astute laboratory and quick prioritization of the specimen for sequencing, and close coordination with public health officials."

Nigeria and Saudi Arabia also reported omicron infections Wednesday, marking the first known cases in West Africa and the Persian Gulf region.

Going further than many other countries in trying to contain the virus, Japan has banned foreign visitors and asked international airlines to stop taking new reservations for all flights arriving in the country until the end of December.

The U.S. is working toward requiring that all air travelers to the country be tested for COVID-19 within a day before boarding their flights, up from the current three days.

On Wednesday, the World Health Organization warned that blanket travel bans are complicating the sharing of lab samples from South Africa that could help scientists understand the new variant.

At the same time the omicron variant is spreading new fear and uncertainty, the dominant delta variant is still creating havoc, especially in Europe. Many countries there are dealing with a surge in infections and hospitalizations, despite a relatively high vaccination rate of 67% of the European Union's population.

For the first time, von der Leyen said EU nations should consider making vaccinations mandatory. Greece plans to fine people over 60 who don't get the shot. And German Chancellor-designate Olaf Scholz said he will back a proposal to require everyone to get vaccinated.

Miller and Balsamo reported from Washington. AP journalists from around the world also contributed to this report.

Baldwin to ABC about shooting: 'I didn't pull the trigger'

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NEW YORK (AP) — Alec Baldwin told ABC's George Stephanopoulos in an interview airing Thursday that he did not pull the trigger on a prop gun he was holding on a New Mexico film set when it went off, killing a cinematographer.

"I didn't pull the trigger," Baldwin said. "I would never point a gun at anyone and pull the trigger at them. Never."

It is Baldwin's first sitdown interview since the Oct. 21 shooting on the set of the western film "Rust." Authorities have said Baldwin was told the gun was safe to handle but continue to investigate how a live round ended up in the weapon.

ABC released a clip Wednesday that shows Baldwin breaking down in tears while describing Halyna Hutchins, the cinematographer who was killed on the set. Director Joel Souza was also wounded.

He said in response to a question about how a live round ended up on the set: "I have no idea. Someone put a live bullet in a gun, a bullet that wasn't even supposed to be on the property."

The interview will air as part of an hourlong special on ABC at 8 p.m. Eastern time on Thursday and stream on Hulu later that evening.

Investigators have described "some complacency" in how weapons were handled on the "Rust" set. They have said it is too soon to determine whether charges will be filed, amid independent civil lawsuits concerning liability in the fatal shooting.

ABC said a two-hour special "20/20" next week will examine the investigation into the shooting in more depth.

South Africa's new COVID cases double in 1 day amid omicron

By ANDREW MELDRUM Associated Press

JOHANNESBURG (AP) — South Africa's new cases of COVID-19 nearly doubled in a day, authorities reported Wednesday, signaling a dramatic surge in the country where scientists detected the omicron variant last week.

New confirmed cases rose to 8,561 Wednesday from 4,373 a day earlier, according to official statistics.

Scientists in South Africa said they are bracing for a rapid increase in COVID-19 cases following the discovery of the new omicron variant.

"There is a possibility that really we're going to be seeing a serious doubling or tripling of the cases as we move along or as the week unfolds," Dr. Nicky Gumede-Moeletsi, regional virologist for the World Health Organization, told The Associated Press. "There is a possibility that we are going to see a vast increase in number of cases being identified in South Africa."

South Africa had seen a period of low transmission in early November with a 7-day average of about 200 new cases per day, but in the middle of November new cases began to rapidly increase. The new cases reported Wednesday represent a 16.5% positivity rate of cases tested, up from a 1% rate early in November.

South Africa's previous surge, driven by the delta variant in June and July, saw daily new cases reach a peak of more than 20,000. With a population of 60 million people, South Africa has recorded more than 2.9 million COVID-19 cases, including nearly 90,000 deaths.

It's too early to be certain that the omicron variant is responsible for the rise in cases, but it is very possible, say experts. Standard PCR tests can suggest that a positive case is caused by omicron, but only a full genetic sequencing can confirm it.

Labs in South Africa and Botswana are urgently doing genomic sequencing to study omicron cases in order to see if it is significantly more transmissible, causes more serious cases of COVID-19 or if it evades protection from vaccinations, said Gumede-Moeletsi.

"The current data that we're having is still very limited. So there are so many additional characteristics of this virus that the researchers are busy studying, of which transmissibility is one of them. Severity is also another," she said, adding that researchers also need to find out if current vaccines will still be effective against it.

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Hospitalizations for COVID-19 are rising in South Africa, but not at the dramatic rate of the new cases. The omicron variant has been detected in five of South Africa's nine provinces and accounted for 74% of the virus genomes sequenced in November, the country's National Institute for Communicable Diseases announced Wednesday.

The earliest detection of the variant in South Africa may have been on Nov. 8 in Gauteng province, according to data released by the institute. It said until the end of October, the delta variant accounted for most genomes sequenced in the country, but in November the omicron variant overtook it.

Follow all AP stories on the pandemic at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>.

Putin demands NATO guarantees not to expand eastward

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — President Vladimir Putin said Wednesday that Moscow would seek Western guarantees precluding any further NATO expansion and deployment of its weapons near his country's borders, a stern demand that comes amid fears of a Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Ukrainian and Western officials have worried about a Russian troop buildup near Ukraine, saying it could signal Moscow's intention of an attack. Russian diplomats countered those claims by expressing concern about Ukraine's own military buildup near the area of the separatist conflict in the eastern part of the country.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, noting that Putin could quickly order an invasion of Ukraine, warned that Washington stands ready to inflict heavy sanctions on Russia if he does.

Speaking at a Kremlin ceremony where he received credentials from foreign ambassadors, Putin emphasized that Russia will seek "reliable and long-term security guarantees."

"In a dialogue with the United States and its allies, we will insist on working out specific agreements that would exclude any further NATO moves eastward and the deployment of weapons systems that threaten us in close vicinity to Russian territory," Putin said.

He charged that "the threats are mounting on our western border," with NATO placing its military infrastructure closer to Russia and offered the West to engage in substantive talks on the issue, adding that Moscow would need not just verbal assurances, but "legal guarantees."

"We aren't demanding any special conditions for ourselves and realize that any agreements must take interests of Russia and all Euro-Atlantic countries into account," Putin said. "A calm and stable situation must be ensured for all and is needed for all without exclusion."

Putin's statement came a day after he sternly warned NATO against deploying its troops and weapons to Ukraine, saying it represented a red line for Russia and would trigger a strong response.

Tensions have been soaring in recent weeks about a Russian troop buildup near Ukraine, which worried Ukrainian and Western officials, who saw it as a possible sign of Moscow's intention to invade its former Soviet neighbor. NATO foreign ministers warned Russia on Tuesday that any attempt to further destabilize Ukraine would be a costly mistake.

The Kremlin insists it has no such intention and has accused Ukraine and its Western backers of making the claims to cover up their own allegedly aggressive designs.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said the concentration of Ukrainian troops looks "alarming," adding that he was going to raise the issue during a ministerial meeting in Stockholm of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe on Thursday. He again assailed Ukraine for failing to meet its obligations under a 2015 peace deal for the region that was brokered by France and Germany and signed in Minsk, Belarus.

"Kyiv is becoming increasingly insolent in its aggressiveness towards the Minsk agreements, the Russian Federation, and in its attempts to provoke the West to support its military ambitions," Lavrov said in remarks in the upper house of Russia's parliament before heading to a meeting with Blinken on the sidelines of the OSCE meeting.

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Speaking Wednesday in Riga, Latvia, Blinken said that “we don’t know whether President Putin has made the decision to invade.”

“We do know that his is putting in place the capacity to do so on short order should he so decide,” Blinken told reporters. “We must prepare for all contingencies.”

The U.S. has “made it clear to the Kremlin that we will respond resolutely, including with a range of high-impact economic measures that we’ve refrained from using in the past,” he said.

Blinken gave no details on what kind of sanctions were under consideration if Russia did invade Ukraine.

In April, the European Parliament approved a nonbinding resolution to cut off Russia from the so-called SWIFT system of international payments if its troops entered Ukraine. Such a move would go far toward blocking Russian businesses from the global financial system, even though Moscow has developed its own parallel system in preparation for such a move.

Western allies reportedly considered such a step during earlier escalations of tensions over Russia’s actions regarding Ukraine. In 2019, then-Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev warned that cutting Russia off SWIFT would effectively amount to a “declaration of war.”

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said Ukraine has amassed about 125,000 troops — about half of the size of its military — near the conflict zone. She also pointed at an increasing number of violations of a cease-fire in the east.

Amid the tensions, Moscow on Wednesday launched drills in southwestern Russia involving over 10,000 troops. A smaller exercise also began in Russia’s westernmost region of Kaliningrad on the Baltic, involving 1,000 personnel from armored units.

Russia annexed Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula in 2014 after the country’s Kremlin-friendly president was driven from power by mass protests. Moscow also threw its weight behind a separatist insurgency in Ukraine’s eastern industrial heartland, known as the Donbas. More than 14,000 people have died in the fighting.

Ukraine and the West accused Russia of sending its troops and weapons to back the rebels. Moscow denied that, charging that Russians who joined the separatists were volunteers.

In Wednesday’s address to parliament, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy called for negotiations with Russia to end the conflict in the east.

“We must tell the truth — we wouldn’t be able to stop the war without direct talks with Russia,” Zelenskyy said. “We aren’t afraid of a direct dialogue.”

About 2,000 people rallied Wednesday in Kyiv to demand Zelenskyy’s resignation, calling his words “a betrayal of national interests.” The demonstrators also demanded the ouster of Andriy Yermak, who heads the Presidential Office, and other allies of Zelenskyy, describing them as “Russia’s agents of influence.”

“We will not allow this government to turn Ukraine into Russia’s province again,” said Oleksandr Turchynov, a former parliament speaker and acting president of Ukraine in 2014, and now a top official of the European Solidarity party, founded by Zelenskyy’s predecessor, Petro Poroshenko.

The Kremlin responded to Zelenskyy’s remarks by reaffirming its long-held stance that Russia isn’t a party to the conflict, describing the fighting in the east as a civil war.

“The war in Donbas is Ukraine’s internal business,” Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters. “We know about the attempts to cast Russia as a party to the conflict, but it’s not so. It’s only possible to end the war in Donbas through talks between Ukrainians.”

Peskov said the Ukrainian troop concentration in Donbas could herald an attempt by Kyiv to reclaim control of the rebel-held territory.

“It makes us worry that inclinations to solve the Donbas problem by force could prevail,” he said. “It’s a very dangerous adventurism.”

David Keyton in Riga, Latvia, Lorne Cook in Brussels, Yuras Karmanau in Kyiv, Ukraine, and Ellen Knickmeyer in Washington contributed.

Loyalty to family, instead of CNN, puts Chris Cuomo at risk

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — There's family, and your job as a journalist. Chris Cuomo's willingness to put the latter at risk in service to his brother has led to his suspension by CNN.

The network took him off the air Tuesday, saying that material released by New York's attorney general shows that he played a greater role than previously acknowledged in defense of his brother, former Gov. Andrew Cuomo, as he fought sexual harassment charges.

Transcripts of emails and Chris Cuomo's testimony before state investigators revealed that he strategized regularly with the governor's aides and tried to help them learn what other journalists were reporting about harassment allegations.

CNN said that he was more involved than its executives — not just the general public — had been aware of.

"As a result, we have suspended Chris indefinitely, pending further evaluation," a CNN spokesperson said. Cuomo, on his SiriusXM show Wednesday, said it "hurts to even say" he's been suspended.

"It's embarrassing," he said, "but I understand it. And I understand why some people feel the way they do about what I did. I've apologized in the past. I mean it. It's the last thing I ever wanted to do was compromise any of my colleagues. And do anything but help."

The Cuomos are part of a New York political dynasty that began with their father, Mario, serving three terms as governor from 1982 to 1996. Andrew was in his third term before resigning this year, and he burned to beat his dad's record.

Andrew was his father's most trusted aide and protector during Mario's first campaign and early years as governor, an example of loyalty that Chris grew up watching even though, at 51, he is more than 13 years younger than his brother.

They frequently describe themselves as best friends.

"He's my brother, and I love him to death no matter what," Chris Cuomo said in his testimony this past July. "I only got one."

Still, they were fiercely competitive, said Michael Shnayerson, author of "The Contender," an unauthorized biography of Andrew that was published in 2015.

"Always, under the mockery and machismo, was a powerful bond — the Cuomos against the world," Shnayerson said. "I can imagine it all too easy for Chris to let that bond cloud his judgment when it came to reporting the news, and following up on leads about Andrew's political enemies."

Throughout his testimony, Chris Cuomo frequently returns to family when asked to explain his frequent contact — often combative — with Andrew's aides as they tried to figure out a way to save the governor's job.

"This is my brother, and I'm trying to help my brother through a situation where he has told me he did nothing wrong," Chris testified. "And that's it for me. How do I help protect my family? How do I protect him? Probably should have been thinking more about how I protect myself, which just never occurred to me."

James' investigation found that Andrew Cuomo sexually harassed at least 11 women. He resigned as governor in August to avoid a likely impeachment trial.

The last time he talked to his brother about the charges, Chris Cuomo said during his testimony, was to figure out what was going to happen and what he would tell their 90-year-old mother.

Cuomo has insisted he has done nothing to try to influence CNN's coverage of his brother's political problems, and that it would be quickly found out if he did.

While people can relate to wanting to help a family member, his primary obligation as a journalist is to CNN's viewers, said Kathleen Culver, director of the Center for Journalism Ethics at the University of Wisconsin. These revelations can damage CNN's reputation, and all journalists, at a time people are already suspicious of the profession, she said.

Journalists need to establish independence from newsmakers. Cuomo "was not independent of his brother in any sense of the term, and that's a very, very big problem," Culver said.

When it was first reported by The Washington Post last May that Cuomo had strategized with his brother's

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aides, CNN said that it was inappropriate but did not discipline him.

"When Chris admitted to us that he had offered advice to his brother's staff, he broke our rules and we acknowledged that publicly," the CNN spokesperson said Tuesday. "But we also appreciated the unique position he was in and understood his need to put family first and job second."

At the request of his brother's aides, Cuomo also used his contacts to find out what other journalists were going to report, most notably the New Yorker's Ronan Farrow. Cuomo said "the idea of one reporter calling another to find out what's coming down the pipe is completely business as usual."

For competitive reasons, journalists are frequently curious about what rivals are working on, although a phone call for that reason would likely result in an angry hang-up.

In this case, Cuomo was seeking "inside information that would be valuable to his family member," Culver said. "It is not inside information that serves the public. That's what makes this extraordinary."

CNN's ultimate decision on Cuomo's future is complicated, in part because it draws attention to how it has treated the issue in the past and its own efforts to investigate his activities. Cuomo testified that he didn't tell anyone at CNN that he was contacting other journalists to find out about the Farrow piece.

"His suspension from CNN is the correct move, and something that should have happened sooner," said Ben Bogardus, a journalism professor at Connecticut's Quinnipiac University. "The longer it dragged on, the more credibility CNN lost."

"Cuomo Prime Time" has averaged 1.3 million viewers a night so far this year, the Nielsen company said. While its audience is down sharply from the 2020 election year, like it is for many cable news programs, it's still CNN's most-watched show, and Cuomo's exit would leave a big hole.

His suspension makes some of the advice that Cuomo told investigators that he gave to his brother during the harassment scandal sound eerily like it could apply to his own situation.

"You have to tell the truth," Cuomo said he advised his brother. "You have to not be coaxed to tell the truth. You have to own what was wrong. You have to apologize. And you have to tell people you've learned from this."

Whether or not he gets that chance is an open question.

1st US case of COVID omicron variant confirmed in California

By MICHAEL BALSAMO and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A person in California who had been vaccinated against COVID-19 became the first in the U.S. to have an identified case of the omicron variant, the White House announced Wednesday as scientists continue to study the risks posed by the new virus strain.

Dr. Anthony Fauci told reporters the person was a traveler who returned from South Africa on Nov. 22 and tested positive on Nov. 29. Fauci said the person was vaccinated but had not received a booster shot and was experiencing "mild symptoms."

The Biden administration moved late last month to restrict travel from Southern Africa where the variant was first identified and had been widespread. Clusters of cases have also been identified in about two dozen other nations.

"We knew that it was just a matter of time before the first case of omicron would be detected in the United States," Fauci said.

He said the person was improving and added, "I think what's happening now is another example of why it's important for people to get vaccinated. But also boosting. Boosting is very important."

Officials said they had contacted everyone who had close contact with the person and they had all tested negative.

Genomic sequencing was conducted at the University of California, San Francisco and the sequence was confirmed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is taking steps to tighten U.S. testing rules for travelers from overseas, including requiring a test for all travelers within a day of boarding a flight to the U.S. regardless of vaccination status. It was also considering mandating post-arrival testing.

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Officials said those measures would only “buy time” for the country to learn more about the new variant and to take appropriate precautions, but that given its transmissibility its arrival in the U.S. was inevitable.

Much remains unknown about the new variant, including whether it is more contagious than previous strains, whether it makes people more seriously ill, and whether it can thwart the vaccine. Fauci, the top U.S. infectious disease expert, said more would be known about the omicron strain in two to four weeks as scientists grow and test lab samples of the virus.

California’s Department of Public Health credited the state’s “large-scale testing and early detection systems” for identifying the case.

“We recognize that everyone is exhausted, and the news of a new variant can be overwhelming. It is important that we collectively focus on the things we know prevent the spread of COVID-19, and its variants,” state public health officials said in a statement.

The announcement of the first U.S. case comes before President Joe Biden plans to outline his strategy on Thursday to combat the virus over the winter. Biden has tried to quell alarm over the omicron variant, saying it was a cause for concern but “not a cause for panic.”

Biden and public health officials have grown more urgent in their pleas for more Americans to get vaccinated — and for those who have been vaccinated to get booster shots to maximize their protection against the virus.

Outside Supreme Court, crowd amplifies abortion arguments

By PARKER PURIFOY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Hundreds of abortion debate partisans crowded the plaza in front of the Supreme Court on Wednesday, trading chants as justices heard the highly anticipated arguments inside.

“Whose choice?” “My choice!” was a frequent call-and-response on the abortion rights side, countered by “Hey hey, ho ho, Roe v. Wade has got to go.”

Jo Luttazi, wearing gloves emblazoned with “Bans Off Our Bodies” on the palms, said everyone should have access to abortion as a form of health care.

“As somebody who is assigned female at birth, and having female anatomy, I have had a terrible time trying to just be able to be in control of my body,” the 22-year-old said. “So issues around bodily autonomy have always been very close to my heart. I knew I had to be here.”

A woman who wanted to be identified only as Nancy held a sign with an American flag on it that said “Pray.”

“We need to come together to stop the murder of millions of children,” she said. “I don’t understand why that’s so controversial. I’m out here to exercise my First Amendment right and I wish that would be respected.”

The crowd rallying with the Center for Reproductive Rights swelled to about 400 as the sun rose over the majestic building, outnumbering the anti-abortion demonstrators holding up images of fetuses.

“You need to repent,” one man yelled into a bullhorn, trying to drown out an abortion rights speaker. “You want women to murder babies. You love the murder of children.”

The center’s president and CEO, Nancy Northup, drew cheers when she said her organization’s lawyers have defended abortion rights before the nation’s highest court four times in the last six years.

“Four trips to the Supreme Court in six years is four trips too many,” Northup said. “We are here to win.”

Democrats Diana DeGette and Barbara Lee, co-chairs of the Congressional Pro-Choice Caucus, were among the representatives who appeared. Lee told the crowd of her experience getting an abortion.

“I remember what it was like before Roe v. Wade. I survived. Many women, especially Black women, did not survive. We will not go back to those ways,” Lee said.

“This issue is about racial equality and justice. This decision is about the right to make decisions about your own body. The right to abortion isn’t real unless everyone can access it.”

Mysteries of omicron variant could take weeks to untangle

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By LAURAN NEERGAARD and LAURA UNGAR AP Medical Writers

A pandemic-weary world faces weeks of confusing uncertainty as countries restrict travel and take other steps to halt the newest potentially risky coronavirus mutant before anyone knows just how dangerous omicron really is.

Will it spread even faster than the already extra-contagious delta variant? Does it make people sicker? Does it evade vaccines' protection or reinfect survivors? There are lots of guesses but little hard evidence as scientists race to find answers amid scrutiny from an anxious public.

"Pretty much the right level of freaking out," is how Trevor Bedford, who studies evolution of the coronavirus at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, characterized health experts' reactions.

Omicron might not turn out "as bad as we're perhaps imagining it could be but treating it as such at the moment I think is entirely appropriate," he said.

Up to now, the world has been slow to react to each coronavirus curveball. This time an early warning from South Africa and Botswana might have offered important head start.

"It's hard to know: Have we just simply caught up to the reality and now the world is reacting with the appropriate speed as variants emerge?" asked Dr. Jacob Lemieux, who monitors variants for a research collaboration led by Harvard Medical School.

WHY THE WORRY?

Omicron raised alarm because of its sheer number of mutations, more than prior variants had. Possibly 30 are in a key place, the spike protein that lets the virus attach to human cells.

Scientists recognize a few mutations from earlier variants that were more contagious or a bit resistant to vaccination. But they've never seen this particular constellation of changes.

Most "are really unique to this virus," said Dr. William Moss of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. "It's that combination of potential increased transmissibility and ability -- potential ability -- to escape our immune system that has everyone worried."

"It is a balance," Moss said. "We want to take this seriously because of the combination of mutations, but we don't want to panic and we don't want to overreact as well until we really learn more about this virus."

SCRAMBLING FOR ANSWERS

Scientists have little data yet on whether omicron causes more severe disease than other variants. And while it already has been diagnosed in numerous countries just days after its discovery was announced, it's also too soon to know how contagious it is.

The alpha variant that emerged about a year ago was more transmissible than the virus that started the pandemic. Then delta hit, far more contagious than alpha.

It's unclear how omicron would compete in a place like the U.S. where that strong delta variant is causing more than 99% of current COVID-19 cases, said Louis Mansky, director of the Institute for Molecular Virology at the University of Minnesota.

Even in certain parts of South Africa, a reported jump in omicron-caused cases may not indicate the mutant is more contagious than delta, Lemieux said.

"We really don't know if omicron is out-competing delta at all or whether it's become the dominant strain in a few places just due to chance," he said.

To understand omicron better, scientists are trying to figure out how it emerged. It's not a descendent of delta. One popular theory is that someone with a severely weakened immune system had a coronavirus infection they couldn't shake for so long that mutations stacked up.

"This is completely bizarre," said Bedford, whose says variants that were circulating in summer of 2020 appear to be omicron's closest relatives.

Viruses mutate every time they spread and it's possible omicron was simmering undetected someplace with poor COVID-19 testing. But Bedford said its sudden appearance is more likely a result of the cat-and-mouse struggle as an immune-compromised body fights a virus that repeatedly changes its spike protein to avoid detection. (Bedford receives funding from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, which also supports The Associated Press Health and Science Department.)

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

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Scientists say it may take two to four weeks to get some important answers.

Among the biggest concerns is how much omicron might evade immunity. So far the beta variant has been the biggest challenge to vaccine protection but that mutant fortunately didn't spread widely.

"It is highly unlikely that this new variant has escaped all antibodies generated following vaccination," said immunologist E. John Wherry of the University of Pennsylvania.

Vaccine makers and other scientists are setting up lab tests to tell how well antibodies generated by vaccines or prior infection can fight omicron compared to earlier variants. It takes time because first, they must grow samples of so-called "pseudoviruses" that hold the worrisome new mutations.

But that "won't be the whole story," Moss said.

The immune system has multiple layers of defense beyond antibodies, including T cells that should help avoid severe disease even if someone experiences a breakthrough infection.

Experts also will be carefully monitoring the prevalence of omicron-caused infections and their severity.

As for treatments, Regeneron says its COVID-19 antibody cocktail may be less effective against omicron although more testing is needed. But there are some antiviral pills in the pipeline, a long-needed new option that shouldn't be affected by omicron's mutations.

WHAT TO DO NOW?

Scientists urge people to take simple precautions as they wait for answers — mask indoors, avoid crowds, get the shots if you are among the 45 million U.S. adults who still haven't been vaccinated — regardless of what variant's circulating.

One thing is clear: Vaccination remains critical. Today's shots do protect against delta and other versions of the virus that already are rampaging regardless of whether omicron spreads or fizzles. The U.S. and other countries are urging people eligible for boosters not to wait because the extra dose causes a huge burst of virus-fighting antibodies.

"People who are on the fence about whether to get vaccinated should see a great reason to get vaccinated. People who haven't yet gotten their boosters and are eligible should get their boosters. And then I think we need to let the scientists and the public health practitioners do their work," Lemieux said.

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.

Former player, labor lawyer lead MLB into 9th work stoppage

By RONALD BLUM AP Baseball Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Tony Clark was a minor league prospect in the Detroit Tigers' system and Rob Manfred a junior lawyer on Major League Baseball management's legal team during the sport's last work stoppage.

Now, they lead billion-dollar factions of a fractured sport that is headed toward a lockout that would start when the collective bargaining agreement expires at 11:59 p.m. EST Wednesday.

"His voice of being a player resonates with fellow players," leading player agent Scott Boras said this week of Clark, who leads the players' union. "That communication branch is a very important part of the union leadership. And I also think that Tony has now armed himself with a strong legal staff."

Barring unexpected progress during talks at the union's executive board meeting in Irving, Texas, it would be baseball's ninth work stoppage and first since the 7 1/2-month strike of 1994-95 that wiped out the World Series for the first time in 90 years. It also would be the first stoppage since the death of Marvin Miller, who led the players' union through the first five stoppages and was a consultant to Donald Fehr during the next three.

Clark, 49 and a dozen years removed from his last at-bat, stands out in a crowd: He's 6-foot-8 with a deep voice and a beard that has turned a professorial white. The former All-Star first baseman is the first former player to head the union, and was hired as director of player relations in March 2010. After union head Michael Weiner was stricken with a malignant brain tumor, he promoted Clark to deputy executive director in July 2013. Clark took over that December following Weiner's death.

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"I expected to be tied to the hip with Michael for 20 years," Clark said.

Clark attended his first executive board meeting in 1999, became a team player representative and then an association representative, playing a part in the 2002 and 2006 bargaining sessions as well as negotiations on revisions to the Joint Drug Agreement.

"The idea of him being a player, you never forget that as part of his resume, but that's not all he is," Curtis Granderson said in 2013.

Manfred, the 63-year-old MLB commissioner, is a graduate of the Cornell School of Industrial and Labor Relations and Harvard Law School. He was an associate when his law firm was retained in 1987 as counsel for MLB's Player Relations Committee, assisted in bargaining during the 1990 spring-training lockout and was promoted to partner in 1991.

Manfred assisted again during the 1994-95 strike and when a deal was reached in 1996-97, and then became an MLB executive vice president in 1998 under Commissioner Bud Selig. He led negotiations for labor deals in 2002 and 2006 with then-Chief Operations Officer Bob DuPuy, headed talks in 2011, and succeeded Selig in January 2015.

"Rob is a very seasoned negotiator," said Yankees president Randy Levine, the lead bargainer in 1996-97. "He has the ability to see paths around the corner for settlement because at the end of the day, these issues change but they're basically the same issues that the parties have been negotiating over and talking about for 40 years."

The union's desires for more liberal free agency and salary arbitration rules, and management's preference for spending restraints — such as the luxury tax and brakes on amateur spending — are always among the key components to a deal. Postseason size and format is also a perennial economic and competitive issue, along with expanding the designated hitter to the National League, a union proposal that MLB has offered to accept this time.

While Deputy Commissioner Dan Halem remains MLB's lead negotiator, Clark replaced Rick Shapiro in 2018 with Bruce Meyer, a former partner at Weil, Gotshal & Manges who has represented the unions in the four major U.S. sports. Boras praised Clark's decision to bring in Meyer, a structure Boras said parallels how Manfred handles negotiating.

"Rob does a lot of communicating with his ownership group has his legal team function in the bargaining area. So I think there is a common structure that now exists between both sides," Boras said.

Both parties appear to think they can outlast the other during a stoppage, a mindset that 27 years ago led to a lengthy strike, causing cancellation of the final 669 games of 1994 and the first 252 games of '95.

Manfred had a close view of the fractious discussions among ownership leading up to Commissioner Fay Vincent's forced resignation in 1992 and during Selig's efforts to build a consensus for bargaining and revenue sharing. MLB's owners have remained more orderly in recent years, but most have not been exposed to the financial and public-relations pressures of a work stoppage.

"I think some of Rob's greatest attributes are his ability to reach consensus," St. Louis Cardinals owner Bill DeWitt Jr. said.

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

Omicron unravels travel industry's plans for a comeback

By DAVID KOENIG and YURI KAGEYAMA Associated Press

Tourism businesses that were just finding their footing after nearly two years of devastation wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic are being rattled again as countries throw up new barriers to travel in an effort to contain the omicron variant.

From shopping districts in Japan and tour guides in the Holy Land to ski resorts in the Alps and airlines the world over, a familiar dread is rising about the renewed restrictions.

Meanwhile, travelers eager to get out there have been thrown back into the old routine of reading up on new requirements and postponing trips.

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Abby Moore, a librarian and associate professor at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte, was scheduled to leave for Prague on Wednesday. But the day before her flight, she started having doubts when she saw that Prague had closed its Christmas markets and imposed a citywide curfew.

"I wasn't really concerned about my trip until the Czech Republic started what looked like a mini-lockdown process," said Moore, who decided to reschedule her travel to March.

Less than a month after significantly easing restrictions for inbound international travel, the U.S. government has banned most foreign nationals who have recently been in any of eight southern African countries. A similar boomerang was seen in Japan and Israel, both of which tightened restrictions shortly after relaxing them.

While it is not clear where the variant emerged, South African scientists identified it last week, and many places, including the European Union and Canada, have restricted travel from the wider region.

For all the alarm, little is known about omicron, including whether it is more contagious, causes more serious illness or can evade vaccines.

Still, governments that were slow to react to the first wave of COVID-19 are eager to avoid past mistakes. The World Health Organization says, however, that travel bans are of limited value and will "place a heavy burden on lives and livelihoods." Other experts say travel restrictions won't keep variants out but might give countries more time to get people vaccinated.

London-based airline easyJet said Tuesday that renewed travel restrictions already appear to be hurting winter bookings, although CEO Johan Lundgren said the damage is not yet as severe as during previous waves. The CEO of SAS Scandinavian Airlines said winter demand was looking up, but now we "need to figure out what the new variants may mean."

"In the past year, each new variant has brought a decline in bookings, but then an increase once the surge dissipates," said Helene Becker, an analyst with financial services firm Cowen.

Hotels, which were recovering more quickly than expected, have experienced a similar phenomenon.

"Every time there has been a variant, as soon as it clears up a little bit (leisure travel) snaps back very quickly. Business travel is a little more uncertain," said Ari Klein, a hotels analyst for BMO Capital Markets.

Israel's decision to close the country to foreign visitors is hitting the nation's tourism industry as it geared up for the Hanukkah and Christmas holidays. The country only opened to tourists in November, after barring most foreign visitors since early last year.

Just over 30,000 tourists entered Israel in the first half of November, compared to 421,000 in November 2019, according to government figures.

Joel Haber, a Jerusalem-based guide, said during a typical Hanukkah holiday his calendar would be chock full of food tours through Jerusalem's colorful Mahane Yehuda market. Instead, he has just one tour a day.

"Tour guides like me are the first to get hit and the last to emerge and are directly prevented from working by a government decision," Haber said.

In the West Bank city of Bethlehem, revered by Christians as Jesus' birthplace, local businesses expected a boost from Christmas tourism. The Bethlehem Hotel, one of the largest in the city, has operated at a fraction of capacity for the past 18 months.

"Everyone who had bookings over the next two weeks has canceled, while others are waiting to see what happens next," said the hotel's manager, Michael Mufdi. "I don't know how much longer we can last, but we are doing our best."

The pandemic already caused foreign tourism in Japan to shrink from 32 million visitors in 2019 to 4 million last year, a trend that has continued through this year.

As worries surfaced about omicron, Japan on Wednesday tightened its ban on foreign travelers, asking airlines to stop taking new reservations for all flights arriving in the country until the end of December. The country earlier reversed a relaxation of travel restrictions that had been in effect just three weeks.

The crowds of Chinese shoppers who used to arrive in Tokyo's glitzy Ginza district in a stream of buses to snap up luxury items have long disappeared. Restaurants and bars have been forced to restrict hours.

In Asakusa, a quaint part of town filled with souvenir shops, rickshaw drivers, and stalls selling traditional

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sweets, news of the omicron variant made little difference this week. Vendors say there hasn't been any business for months except for a few local customers.

In South Africa, Frederic Plachesi, owner of Tamboti lodge in Dinokeng Game Reserve, is facing a similar fall-off in the international guests his business relies on.

"The odds are for the next few months, only locals will visit the lodge," said Plachesi. "We estimate a 60% loss of business because of the omicron restrictions."

In Europe, Alpine ski resorts worry about how to keep up with requirements such as ensuring all skiers are vaccinated or recovered from infection and have tested negative for the virus.

Matthias Stauch, head of the German ski lift operators association VDS, said many are small family businesses that lack the staff to perform such checks. Meanwhile, the association is warning about "massive" economic damage to the tourism sector if there is another lockdown.

Travel executives argue that government decisions about restrictions should wait until more is known about omicron, but they admit it's a difficult call.

"If you wait, by the time you have all the data it's probably too late to stop community spread because (the virus) is already here," said Robert Jordan, the incoming CEO at Southwest Airlines. "If you jump ahead, you run the risk of the measures being more impactful than the actual cases."

About a month ago, Javier Barragan and his husband booked a visit to Paris for later this month. When news of omicron hit, they were concerned but decided to go ahead with the trip.

"The way that it was in the news, there's a sense of 'Oh, is this worse? Is this different?'" said Barragan, who lives in New York. France's health protocols — the couple will have to submit vaccine cards to enter the country — made them feel more comfortable. Also, both got booster shots.

They did, however, buy travel insurance that will cover cancellation for most any reason.

Koenig reported from Dallas and Kageyama from Tokyo. Associated Press journalists Mae Anderson and Tali Arbel in New York; Dee-Ann Durbin in Detroit; Tia Goldenberg in Tel Aviv, Israel; Jack Jeffery in Bethlehem, West Bank; Frank Jordans in Berlin; Pan Pylas in London; Mogomotsi Magome in Johannesburg; and Jerome Delay at the Dinokeng Game Reserve, South Africa, contributed.

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

Volcanic lava threatens church, more homes on La Palma

By EMILIO MORENATTI Associated Press

LOS LLANOS DE ARIDANE, Canary Islands (AP) — A fresh river of lava from the volcano on Spain's La Palma island threatened Wednesday to engulf a parish church that has so far survived the eruption that shows no signs of relenting after 10 weeks.

The nearest lava flow to the Los Llanos de Aridane church has slowed down since it started over the weekend but it is still only 1 kilometer (0.6 miles) away.

Molten rock from the Sept. 19 eruption on La Palma, part of Spain's Canary Islands archipelago, has consumed over 1,500 buildings and covered over 1,130 hectares (2,800 acres) including banana farms, the island's main source of revenue along with tourism.

A nearby cemetery has been completely covered, burying for a second time the remains of 3,000 people. A fissure that volcanologists believe spouted a gusher of lava has also left a gaping hole in front of a house whose bottom floor was completely covered by a mountain of ash.

"The lava is flowing mostly on top of previous flows that have hardened," Noelia García, the mayor of Los Llanos de Aridane, told Canary Islands Television. "But we won't dare make a prediction (about its course)."

The volcano is going strong and seismic activity in the area has increased in recent days. Spain's National Geographic Institute registered 341 earthquakes over the past 24 hours.

Thousands of residents have been displaced by the eruption, which has not claimed any lives on the westernmost member of the archipelago in the Atlantic Ocean off the northwest coast of Africa.

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Follow all AP stories on the La Palma volcano at <https://apnews.com/hub/volcanic-eruptions>

Dystopia, 'she-cession,' TikTok dances: We're over you, 2021

By LEANNE ITALIE AP Entertainment Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The pandemic, politics, pervasive anxiety over the climate and the economy. Did 2021 leave us any time to ponder anything else? As we limp our way into a new year, there are a few more things we'd like to leave behind, from pop culture's obsession with all things apocalyptic to the well meaning but exhausting lay dancers on TikTok.

A list of what we're over as we look for renewal and hope in 2022:

DYSTOPIA PALOOZA

War, destruction, disaster: Popular entertainment has certainly reflected, expanded upon and imagined the very doom of it all. But must it continue at the same rapid clip? The latest, "Squid Game," was a huge score for Netflix. Its creator can't imagine a future without a second season of the deadly Korean series. Fans rejoiced. Dystopia is merely one genre, however, one storytelling technique. Would we not benefit from an equally heavy dose of stories that focus on solutions and, dare we say it, inspiration? We're talking that middle ground between zombies and "The Great British Baking Show." Just think about it.

TIKTOK DANCEATHON

You seem like a nice person, but you're a registered dietitian, not a dancer. And, quite sadly, you never will be. Yes, we could scroll right on by and not gaze on your barely there moves. Yes, we realize you're having a great time and simply trying to entertain. But there are just so darn many of you. TikTok was built on wacky dance trends (remember the Floss?), but the short-video platform has grown into much, much more as millions signed on during the pandemic. So where does that leave all that dancing? Slightly and thankfully muted for the dance-craze weary.

THE SHE-CESSION

There's little doubt the pandemic touched all our lives in different ways and continues to wreak havoc around the globe. There's also little doubt that women were disproportionately impacted as they struggled to make it all work from home. And, yes, men did things but women had higher job losses and increased responsibilities. The economic fallout was dubbed the "she-cession." The thing is, what's the alternative, a "he-cession?" Nope. Some women find the gender-specific term demeaning and ask that the media and economists cut it out. And while we're on the subject, can we rid ourselves of the term Great Resignation, aka the Great Quit, for all those folks who voluntarily left the workforce? Good luck to them.

SHAPEWEAR

It made Kim Kardashian West a pile of money to go with her other piles of money. Her Skims shapewear brand, which branched into loungewear during the pandemic, is valued at \$1.6 billion, according to The New York Times. It comes in a range of styles, colors and sizes. Oprah Winfrey and Reese Witherspoon are among new investors in Spanx. But hasn't life lived largely at home taught us to embrace our bulges, bumps and whatever else it is we're trying to hide with shapewear? Can't we all just march back into our old lives feeling good in our own skins? Let alone the idea there are some health risks to intensely compressing our organs for prolonged periods. Let it fly, people! Don't let the old constraints of the fashion elite take over after all those months in cozy duds and the de-escalation of underwire. #FreeOurBodies.

NFTS

Will they be over before oh so many people have figured out exactly what they are? So some naysayers predict while stans fuel headlines and the little buggers sell for millions. Non-fungible tokens are, basically, digital art or just about anything else in digital form. They're stored on blockchains (digital ledgers). The point, you ask? Good question. NFTs are effectively digital certificates of authenticity, like the declaration in the physical world that your original van Gogh is one of a kind. The rest of us will be heading to the non-digital gift shop for the poster or fridge magnet as the world figures out the metaverse. On offer: The NFT of the Merriam-Webster definition of NFT, with net proceeds going to the global nonprofit Teach

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for All. Hallelujah.

LEVEL UP

There's a whole lotta leveling up going on in a world where level off and level out already reside. And by level up, we're talking the gamer term for making it to the next level. The phrase has gone mainstream in a range of contexts. The perfectly good and universally understood alternatives? How about advance, develop, improve, evolve, grow and, we venture, ameliorate. Can we just celebrate our work successes, our upgrades, our escalations, our impressive pushes onward without reinvention for reinvention's sake? As Ciara sings: five, four, three, two, one ...

HARD SELTZERS

What Zima started White Claw ran with. Now, we've got enough hard seltzers to make it straight on through to end of days. Just about any flavor profile can be had in a bubbly, spiked concoction in a can. There was a pickle-flavored variety until the marketing grab by two companies in collaboration sold out. No worries. You've still got your Bud Lites, your Pabst Blue Ribbons, your Topo Chico. You've got your pineapple-limes, your honeydew and your apple-pear. You've got your tequila-based grapefruit, your ultra organic and your watermelon chili. Still unavailable, as spoofed on "Saturday Night Live": the J.C. Penneys and Jiffy Lubes, Exxons and Verizons. Can we take day drinking old school, pretty please?

BILLIONAIRES IN SPACE

The billionaires in space boys club got plenty of attention in 2021 as the rest of us navigated our topsy-turvy lives here on Earth. There's lots to chew on as to the many millions spent to make that happen, in a suborbital, edge of space, floating in microgravity for a few minutes at most kind of way. And there's the off-color jokes, of course. The ones about size and whether it matters. And there's the great pondering over Elon Musk and why he isn't a card carrying club member despite his founding of Space X. Richard Branson went into space aboard his Virgin Galactic rocket July 11. Branson beat out Jeff Bezos, who took his supersonic jaunt aboard his Blue Origin ship July 20. Billionaire Jared Isaacman led the first all-private orbital mission that splashed down in September after three days in orbit thanks to Space X. Because, commercial space travel is the future, don't ya know. So are food insecurity, income insecurity, health care access barriers and homelessness for folks without a ticket to ride. Aim higher.

SUPPLY CLOGS

The global supply chain is under the weather. Factories have been forced to close amid COVID surges. The number of shipping containers is short and they're unattainable to those who can't afford them. Small businesses can't pay for alternate shipping methods. Ports and warehouse are backed up. There aren't enough truckers. Prices are on the rise as U.S. households feeling flush from stimulus checks, booming stock markets and fattened home equity have gone all spendy. Really spendy, with all of the above creating shortages of goods. Oh my. Happy holidays, one and all. Over It.

Follow Leanne Italie on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/litalie>

Vaccine champions Spain, Portugal focus on the reluctant few

By ARITZ PARRA, HELENA ALVES and JOSEPH WILSON Associated Press

MADRID (AP) — Juan Esteban Mariño, a healthy 29-year-old, has been part of the rare cohort in Spain who have resisted health authorities' strong recommendations to get their vaccine shots. His position only changed when he planned an end-of-the-year holiday in Portugal, where authorities are cracking down on unvaccinated visitors as they confront a surge of infections and try to limit the spread of the omicron variant.

"I needed to get the jab to leave the country and return without any inconveniences," Mariño said Wednesday at a large vaccination center in Madrid as he pressed sterile gauze against his left arm and rolled down his sleeve.

"With the new variant and restrictions complicating life, getting the vaccine has become unavoidable," he added.

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Long lines for getting vaccines have returned to Portugal and Spain, two neighboring European Union nations that, despite having inoculation figures that are the envy of the world, are stepping up efforts to close the gap on the few residents still unvaccinated. Both nations have reported cases of the omicron variant.

The Iberian neighbors were rocked by the first waves of the pandemic that left tens of thousands dead. Since then, the two have become models for international health experts, who have applauded their populations' trust in COVID-19 vaccines.

People at the Wizink Center, a large concert hall turned into a "vaccine-drome" in the Spanish capital of Madrid, give an array of reasons why they didn't get their shots sooner. In addition, many people over 60 were lining up for booster shots, which authorities want to extend soon to younger groups.

But, like Mariño, many say that proving they are either vaccinated or have recovered recently from COVID-19 is becoming compulsory in many places that had resisted the health passes until now.

Iris Reichen, a 61-year-old German-Spanish interpreter, said she was compelled to get her first shot by reports about the fast-spreading omicron variant, whose possible impact is still being considered by health experts, and because her social life had suffered.

"Friends no longer invite the nonvaccinated to their private dinners," she said.

A recent survey by Spain's polling institute, CIS, showed that about a third of the 1.6 million adults who remain unvaccinated in Spain were still planning to get their shots. But nearly 3% of those polled — the equivalent of 1 million people if the figure was extrapolated to the country's total population — were planning to avoid it. The poll, which CIS conducted last month before some Spanish regions introduced mandatory COVID-19 passes, showed that the resistance was across the political spectrum.

To convince hold-outs to get a shot, Spain's Health Ministry has started to publish data showing how the disease hits different groups. Vaccinated people aged 60 to 80, its says, have 8 times fewer chances of getting infected, 18 times less of ending in a hospital, and 25 times less chance of dying of COVID-19.

Mandatory COVID-19 passes, another measure increasingly popular among regional authorities, remain controversial.

In an internal report leaked Wednesday, a panel of experts advising Spanish health authorities warned against the "false security" that the health certificates can give in a country where nearly 90% of those eligible are vaccinated. The experts insisted that mask-wearing, which is mandatory in enclosed spaces and common in the streets of Spain, and other social-distancing measures are still more effective against contagion.

Authorities in the northeastern Catalonia region have reopened mass vaccination venues for jabs and are allowing people to get walk-in appointments after announcing that the health certificates will be needed to enjoy everything from a meal in a restaurant to a concert.

Catalan Public Health Secretary Carmen Cabezas said "both first shots and second shots are increasing" and that over the past week alone, authorities had seen an 81% increase in first vaccine doses given out.

In some instances, police had to be summoned to disperse crowds forming long after vaccination centers had closed.

Long lines formed also in Lisbon, where Portugal's largest vaccination center to date opened for the first time on Wednesday as authorities tried to encourage the 2% of the population who are not vaccinated yet — Europe's best vaccination rate — and speed up giving out booster shots.

Despite the country's excellent vaccination record, cases have been rising nonstop over the past two months, although hospitalizations are far from the worrying levels seen in previous surges. Portugal on Wednesday reported 4,607 new infections, a significant uptick from previous days. An outbreak of the omicron variant among a professional soccer club in Lisbon and a medical worker who had contact with them has also added to concerns.

Starting Wednesday, Portuguese authorities were tightening passenger entry requirements and mandated masks indoors as the country entered a "state of calamity." The crisis declaration, Portugal's second this year, is one step below a state of emergency and gives the government the authority to impose stricter measures without parliamentary approval.

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Masks now are required in enclosed public spaces, and individuals must show proof of vaccination, having recovered from COVID-19 or a negative virus tests to enter restaurants, cinemas, gyms and hotels. Nightclubs, hospitals, nursing homes and sports venues also require tests from visitors and patrons, including vaccinated ones.

"With the test, we feel more comfortable. We don't leave the club thinking, 'Do I have COVID or not?'" Sara Lopes, a 21-year-old shop worker, said at a Lisbon nightclub as the new requirements took effect at midnight.

"It's a bit of a hassle to have to make appointment after appointment at the pharmacy, but it's fine," she said.

Alves reported from Lisbon, Portugal, and Wilson from Barcelona, Spain. Alicia León in Madrid contributed to this report.

Follow all AP stories on the pandemic at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>.

Explosion of WWII bomb in Munich injures 4, disrupts trains

BERLIN (AP) — A World War II bomb exploded at a construction site next to a busy railway line in Munich on Wednesday, injuring four people, one of them seriously, German authorities said.

A column of smoke was seen rising from the site near the Donnersbergerbrücke station. The construction site for a new commuter train line is located on the approach to Munich's central station, which is a bit over a kilometer (about a half-mile) to the east.

Trains to and from that station, one of Germany's busiest, were suspended but service resumed in mid-afternoon. A few local trains were evacuated. The fire service said there was no damage to the tracks.

Unexploded bombs are still found frequently in Germany, even 76 years after the end of the war, and often during work on construction sites. They are usually defused or disposed of in controlled explosions, a process that sometimes entails large-scale evacuations as a precaution.

Bavaria's state interior minister, Joachim Herrmann, said the 250-kilogram (550-pound) bomb was found during drilling work, German news agency dpa reported.

Herrmann said authorities must now investigate why it wasn't discovered earlier. He noted that such construction sites are usually scanned carefully in advance for possible unexploded bombs.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Dec. 2, the 336th day of 2021. There are 29 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 2, 1859, militant abolitionist John Brown was hanged for his raid on Harpers Ferry the previous October.

On this date:

In 1697, London's St. Paul's Cathedral, designed by Sir Christopher Wren, was consecrated for use even though the building was still under construction.

In 1823, President James Monroe outlined his doctrine opposing European expansion in the Western Hemisphere.

In 1942, an artificially created, self-sustaining nuclear chain reaction was demonstrated for the first time at the University of Chicago.

In 1954, the U.S. Senate passed, 67-22, a resolution condemning Sen. Joseph R. McCarthy, R-Wis., saying he had "acted contrary to senatorial ethics and tended to bring the Senate into dishonor and disrepute."

In 1957, the Shippingport Atomic Power Station in Pennsylvania, the first full-scale commercial nuclear

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facility in the U.S., began operations. (The reactor ceased operating in 1982.)

In 1970, the newly created Environmental Protection Agency opened its doors under its first director, William D. Ruckelshaus.

In 1980, four American churchwomen were raped and murdered in El Salvador. (Five national guardsmen were convicted in the killings.)

In 1982, in the first operation of its kind, doctors at the University of Utah Medical Center implanted a permanent artificial heart in the chest of retired dentist Dr. Barney Clark, who lived 112 days with the device.

In 1993, Colombian drug lord Pablo Escobar was shot to death by security forces in Medellin (meh-deh-YEEN').

In 2000, Al Gore sought a recount in South Florida, while George W. Bush flatly asserted, "I'm soon to be the president" and met with GOP congressional leaders.

In 2001, in one of the largest corporate bankruptcies in U.S. history, Enron filed for Chapter 11 protection.

In 2015, a couple loyal to the Islamic State group opened fire at a holiday banquet for public employees in San Bernardino, California, killing 14 people and wounding 21 others before dying in a shootout with police.

Ten years ago: U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi (ahng sahn soo chee) vowed to work together to promote democratic reforms in Suu Kyi's long-isolated and authoritarian homeland.

Five years ago: A fire that raced through an illegally converted warehouse in Oakland, California, during a dance party killed 36 people. President-elect Donald Trump spoke with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen (tsy ying-WEN') in a highly unusual move that was bound to antagonize China.

One year ago: Britain became the first country in the world to authorize a rigorously tested COVID-19 vaccine, giving the go-ahead for emergency use of the vaccine developed by American drugmaker Pfizer and Germany's BioNTech. In a video released on social media, President Donald Trump stood before a White House lectern and delivered a 46-minute diatribe against the election results that produced a win for Democrat Joe Biden, unspooling one misstatement after another to back his baseless claim that he really won. Issuing a final rule covering animals on airplanes, the Transportation Department said only dogs could fly as service animals, and that pets used for emotional support didn't count.

Today's Birthdays: Former Attorney General Edwin Meese III is 90. Former Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., is 82. Actor Cathy Lee Crosby is 77. Movie director Penelope Spheeris is 76. Actor Ron Raines is 72. Country singer John Wesley Ryles is 71. Actor Keith Szarabajka is 69. Actor Dan Butler is 67. Broadcast journalist Stone Phillips is 67. Actor Dennis Christopher is 66. Actor Steven Bauer is 65. Country singer Joe Henry is 61. Rock musician Rick Savage (Def Leppard) is 61. Actor Brendan Coyle is 58. Rock musician Nate Mendel (Foo Fighters) is 53. Actor Suzy Nakamura is 53. Actor Rena Sofer is 53. Rock singer Jimi (cq) HaHa (Jimmie's Chicken Shack) is 53. Actor Lucy Liu (loo) is 53. U.S. Veterans Affairs Secretary Denis McDonough is 52. Rapper Treach (Naughty By Nature) is 51. Actor Joe Lo Truglio is 51. International Tennis Hall of Famer Monica Seles is 48. Singer Nelly Furtado is 43. Pop singer Britney Spears is 40. Actor-singer Jana Kramer is 38. Actor Yvonne Orji is 38. Actor Daniela Ruah (roo-ah) is 38. NFL quarterback Aaron Rodgers is 38. Actor Alfred Enoch is 33. Pop singer-songwriter Charlie Puth is 30.