

Groton Daily Independent

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UpComing Events

Friday, Dec. 3

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

Saturday, Dec. 4

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

Monday, Dec. 6

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

Tuesday, Dec. 7

GBB hosts Flandreau Indian. Varsity only at 6 p.m.
JHGBB at Tiospa Zina (7th at 4 p.m. with 8th to follow)

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

"From what we get
we can make a
living, what we
give, however,
makes a life."

-ARTHUR ASHE



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.

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.
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#488 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

I'm checking in today primarily to deal with the change in FDA approval and CDC guidance for boosters, but we'll take care of what other news there is as long as we're talking.

First up: We're in trouble. The number of daily new cases went back up over 100,000 this week and stayed there. That's dragging our seven-day average up; it hit 94,606 today. This average has grown by one-third in the last two weeks, and I see no sign that's going to slow down anytime soon. Well over half of the states are in unchecked transmission territory, and 36 states are experiencing double-digit percentage growth in new cases.

Hospitalizations are a lagging indicator; it takes a while after diagnosis before folks typically show up in emergency rooms, so increases in those numbers are going to lag new cases. We've been seeing growth in new cases for long enough now that hospitalizations have stopped dropping; they're flat at 48,133 and poised to increase further following the case numbers. I expect that effect will be somewhat muted by the effects of the highly effective monoclonal antibody therapies available and, perhaps soon, a couple of other therapies on the horizon; those, expeditiously employed, will keep folks out of hospitals. We're seeing the same pattern with deaths numbers; these lag hospitalizations. Deaths are essentially flat too at a seven-day average of 1157 and also likely to start increasing in due time. This following effect will likely be somewhat mitigated by our growing knowledge about effectively managing patients, but it's worrisome that we bottomed out while still over 1000 deaths per day—haven't been consistently below that for three months.

We're starting from a higher jumping-off place than we have in any previous surge of this pandemic, and new treatments notwithstanding, there are surely some rough days ahead. Mind-boggling that we're in a spot like this 11 months after we gained access to safe and effective vaccines and at least seven months since the supply was sufficient for the population—hard to believe we were on our way back down just a few weeks ago. We've done this and done this, and still we don't get that you can't let up on precautions just because the future's looking better; you have to wait until that future actually arrives. What's more, we're doing this again and we haven't even hit the holidays yet. Buckle up: It's going to be a long winter.

To that point, on Wednesday the TSA announced they are looking at Thanksgiving travel at levels approaching those before the pandemic, some 20 million; there were around 26 million traveling for Thanksgiving in 2019. Given the transmission rates we're seeing, this has me concerned. I'm going to acknowledge air travel is one of the less risky things you can do given the mask mandates that are in place in airports and on airplanes, not to mention the excellent air handling systems on planes; however, we must still consider the possibility of carrying virus from high-transmission areas to low-transmission areas and the risk posed simply by being indoors with lots of other people for extended periods of time while vaccination rates are so low.

That said, I've done some traveling myself in recent months, so I'm not going to stand in judgement at this point. I do urge you to be cautious and conscious of the risks; we've discussed ways to minimize those. It really is time to give attention to transmission rates at point of origin and destination, strategies to avoid being the one who brings more virus into an area that's climbing out of a hole or worsening the situation in an area that's struggling—masking, distancing, staying out of crowds, avoiding unnecessary contacts, and all the rest. And yes, these are important strategies even if you're staying home for the holidays.

Nine more states had expanded access to boosters, joining California, Colorado, New Mexico, Arkansas, West Virginia, and New York; the new additions are Utah, Kansas, Minnesota, Kentucky, Maine, Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island. Kansas governor Laura Kelly said in a statement, "Expanding access to booster shots will help us put an end to this deadly pandemic." I think everyone hopes so; it will certainly protect those who receive them, and that's an accomplishment.

Moderna announced on Wednesday that they had made application to the FDA for an extension of their vaccine's emergency use authorization (EUA) to cover boosters for all adults at least six months past their initial vaccination series. This is the same request as the one from Pfizer/BioNTech the agency was go-

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ing to consider this week although it is a half-dose booster in contrast to the other two vaccines on the market in the US whose boosters require a full dose. I don't know which factors weigh in these decisions, so I'm wondering whether the fact that so many people are having boosters anyway may have had some bearing on the decision which was made. We already know the boosters are safe and effective, so the only remaining question in the decision was whether it's good policy.

The FDA commissioner apparently thinks so because she did, as expected, sign off on this boosters-for-all strategy for both the Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna vaccines earlier today. The CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices also met today to consider the guidelines that will apply to administration of these boosters. They heard safety data from the agency and from the vaccine manufacturers showing the boosters have not caused any new adverse events; the most common reactions are still mild and self-limiting, things like a sore arm, headache, and fatigue. The committee then voted late this afternoon, 11 – 0, to recommend the boosters for all adults six months after the initial series is completed. They also voted unanimously to strengthen the recommendation for anyone 50 and older. Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the CDC, signed off on both recommendations about an hour later; and it's official.

It has been noted by many experts that a broadened booster program probably will not have a significant impact on the trajectory of this pandemic in the US; they say what we most need is more people vaccinated. I would agree, but I'm not sure how we achieve that goal beyond the ongoing efforts to reach those with access problems and genuine questions that can be resolved by providing solid information. Seems to me the vaccination effort is bumping up against a fairly hardened wall of resistance which is largely fueled by bad actors who are lying to a credulous public. I think we'd be best off to funnel vaccine to those unvaccinated folks too, but that works only if they'll take it. They won't. Given that, our best bet is to reduce the risk those unvaccinated people represent to the rest of us—to protect as well as possible those who wish to be protected, and that means boosters. So be it.

The administration estimates around 1.7 million kids received a first dose of vaccine, about twice those vaccinated in the first week of eligibility. This week we'll be over 10 percent of newly eligible kids. We are approaching 80 percent of the population 12 and over with at least a first shot. We'll keep pecking away at the unvaccinated population, getting to folks who are willing to consider it, but we know there's a hard core of resistance that isn't going to go away. Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said "unvaccinated people were 13 times more likely than fully vaccinated people to become infected with the coronavirus during the month of September and 20 times more likely to die of Covid-19." In Indiana during the first week of October, of the 1447 people hospitalized with Covid-19, 10 were vaccinated and, of 219 who died, fewer than 15 were fully vaccinated.

We know that vaccination reduces your risk for infection with SARS-CoV-2 and your risk for developing symptoms, as well as your risk for severe disease and death. One question that lingers is whether vaccination reduces your risk for long Covid, that collection of symptoms that persists for weeks or months after the onset of acute infection. Last time we talked, we discussed a study that indicates as many as half or even more of Covid-19 patients develop long Covid, so that is an outcome of real interest to vaccinated people. I doubt anyone wants to contemplate long-term disability, but this is what we're seeing. I read a summary of a study from a team at King's College, London, that was published in the Lancet a few weeks ago and addresses just this question. Findings were that vaccinated people who had a breakthrough infection were less than half as likely to develop long Covid as unvaccinated people who were infected. In the vaccinated group, five percent of those with a positive RT-PCR test developed long Covid whereas, in the unvaccinated group, 11.5 percent did. When you add this effect to the fact that vaccinated people are far less likely to get infected in the first place, there is a substantial reduction in long Covid afforded by vaccination.

I know that my focus on the US gives short shrift to the worldwide crisis in this pandemic. I am retaining this focus because I just don't have the bandwidth to track the world. I try to give you periodic updates on what's happening, but I acknowledge these are not adequate to develop a picture of the rest of the world. That said, I think it's important to acknowledge that more than 4.1 billion people have received at least

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one dose of vaccine, which accounts for around 53.5 percent of the world's population. Rich countries like the US are way ahead of many places despite our abysmal vaccine uptake; and then we're behind every developed country. We're no longer in the top 100 countries for vaccination, and that's not a great thing.

Dr. Rochelle Walensky said on Wednesday that we are seeing an increasing number of people 65 and older in emergency rooms with Covid-19. This is a population 86 percent of whom have received full vaccination, but only 36.6 percent have received boosters. While she didn't talk about the reasons for this, given the relatively lower immune response of aging people to the initial vaccine series in the first place and the reduction in immunity seen with time after vaccination, it seems likely their vaccine-derived immunity is waning and needs beefing up, which is just what the booster is supposed to accomplish. It's going to be important going into winter to get these folks boosted, particularly those in long-term care where their risks for severe outcomes are much greater than those in those living in the community.

Today we received two new CDC reports on the risks of Covid-19 in pregnancy. One looks at deaths data from Mississippi from early March, 2020, to early October, 2021. It found there were 15 deaths among 1637 people infected while pregnant. Fourteen of those cases were in people with underlying conditions; none had been fully vaccinated. Fourteen required mechanical ventilation. Three died during pregnancy ("one spontaneous abortion at 9 weeks and two stillbirths at 22 and 23 weeks' gestation"), the others after giving birth, seven of those emergency cesarean sections. The effect of the Delta variant is seen when we consider deaths rose from 5 per 1000 infections before Delta became dominant to 25 deaths per 1000 after.

The other report deals with stillbirths. Covering pretty much the same time frame as the above report and looking at 1.2 million deliveries at 736 hospitals, it found that stillbirth was one and a half times more common in deliveries with Covid-19 than in deliveries without Covid-19 before Delta swept across the country. After Delta, stillbirth rose to become four times more common in deliveries with Covid-19. We've been talking about the risks of Covid-19 in pregnancy; this work puts numbers to that conversation, pointing up the importance of vaccination for pregnant people and those considering becoming pregnant.

I read a study from a Washington University School of Medicine researcher published Thursday in JAMA Network. It deals with what is called chronic olfactory dysfunction (COD)—loss or alteration of the sense of smell lasting more than six months—in those recovered from Covid-19. There are three ways this disorder manifests itself: (1) Some people simply lose their sense of smell entirely or it is greatly diminished. (2) Some find that things don't smell the way they used to: coffee that smells like gasoline or excrement. (3) Some smell things that aren't there: thinking you smell smoke when there is no source of smoke. Diminishment in this sense was generally seen before this pandemic in older people who gradually lose their ability to smell things; in younger people loss or alteration generally occurs only as a result of head trauma. The author tells us COD is associated with "decreased general quality of life, impaired food intake, inability to detect harmful gas and smoke, enhanced worries about personal hygiene, diminished social well-being, and the initiation of depressive symptoms. Most people may recover their sense of smell at some point, but some may never do so. There are no specific therapies available for COD right now. No one has studied this phenomenon beyond six months, so the outlook past that time is still fairly unknown.

This analysis worked with data from the COVID Tracking Project. Looking at acute incidence of olfactory dysfunction and rates of recovery, the author concluded that at least 700,000 and possibly as many as 1.6 million US residents are experiencing COD due to Covid-19 with the distinct possibility that the true number may be far higher. Prior to the pandemic we were estimated to have 13.3 million individuals with this condition, so Covid-19 has added substantially to those numbers and also skewed the age range of affected individuals toward a younger demographic. This is just one more sequela of this infection we may be dealing with for decades to come.

That wraps things up for tonight. Be well. I'll be back in a few days.

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H E L P

W A N T E D

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!

605-397-2365


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GROTON

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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!

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Groton Prairie Mixed

Dec. 2 Team Standings: Cheetahs 13, Shih Tzus 11, Coyotes 11, Chipmunks 10, Jackelopes 8, Foxes 7

Men's High Games: Brad Larson 230, Randy Stanley 211, Ron Belden 190

Women's High Games: Vicki Walter 197, Nicole Kassube 176, Sue Stanley 175

Men's High Series: Brad Larson 569, Ron Belden 544, Roger Spanier 533

Women's High Series: Nicole Kassube 487, Vicki Walter 476, Michelle Johnson 473

GROTON AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT #06-6

Special School Board Meeting

December 6, 2021 – 4:00 PM – GHS Library Conference Room

AGENDA:

1. Call to Order with members present. Approve agenda as proposed or amended.

POTENTIAL CONFLICTS DISCLOSURE PURSUANT SDCL 23-3

OLD/CONTINUING BUSINESS:

1. Open Forum for Public Participation...in accordance with Board Policy & Guidelines.

NEW BUSINESS:

1. School Board Governance Training (ASBSD – Jim Holbeck)
2. School Board Goal Setting Work Session

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NSU recognizes scholarship recipients for 2021

ABERDEEN, S.D. – Northern State University in Aberdeen, S.D., recognizes scholarship winners for 2021, including the WolfPACT Scholarship and Dual Credit Scholarship.

The WolfPACT is the largest guaranteed, four-year scholarship in South Dakota. Students entering their freshman year at NSU are eligible for various funding amounts based on their ACT scores and GPA.

Northern started offering the NSU Dual Credit Scholarship in fall 2021 to any new freshman taking dual credit courses through a South Dakota high school. This scholarship can be awarded on top of the WolfPACT.

Scholarship recipients who requested their information be sent to the media are listed below, grouped by hometown and/or state. Students who received both the WolfPACT and HSDC are listed under both scholarships.

WolfPACT Scholarship
South Dakota
Morgan Dannen, Aberdeen
Megan Fastenau, Aberdeen
Payton Gross, Aberdeen
Kayleen Hermans, Aberdeen
Jordan Hermansen, Aberdeen
Lane Malsom, Aberdeen
Grace Nelson, Aberdeen
Julia Orr, Aberdeen
Skylar Pike, Aberdeen
Tia Swiontek, Aberdeen
Lily Tobin, Aberdeen
Cora Wager, Aberdeen
Ashley Wandry, Aberdeen
Benjamin Wirth, Aberdeen
Emma Woehl, Aberdeen
Bryce Peterson, Bristol
Brynlee Lokkeberg, Colton
Ally Cunningham, Faulkton
Peyton Melius, Faulkton

Braden Freeman, Groton
Logan Hinman, Groton
Regan Leicht, Groton
Grace Wiedrick, Groton

Kielee Otten, Hudson
Tyson Lien, Huron
Hailey Bierman, Ipswich
Angeline Rye, Ipswich
Emily Palmer, Langford
Avery Wolff, Leola
Abigail Brooks, Madison
Estella Bullis, Mitchell
Tyler Kjetland, Mitchell
Faith Ragels, Mitchell
Hayden Bohl, Northville
Jonathan Burkhalter, Prairie City



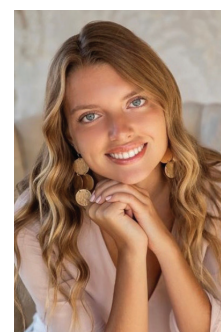
**Braden
Freeman**



**Logan
Hinman**



**Grace
Wiedrick**



**Regan
Leicht**

Nick Preble, Rapid City
Arin Wagner, Rapid City
Vanessa Klein, Rosholt
Randi Schuster, Roslyn
Ava Pickard, Sioux Falls
Alexandra Zwaschka, Spearfish
Landon Leidholt, Warner
Abby Hartman, Watertown
Delanie Tschakert, Watertown
Josie Mehling, Wessington
Cassidy Slykhuis, Woonsocket

South Dakota
Dual Credit Scholarship
Morgan Dannen, Aberdeen
Megan Fastenau, Aberdeen
Payton Gross, Aberdeen
Kayleen Hermans, Aberdeen
Jordan Hermansen, Aberdeen
Lane Malsom, Aberdeen
Grace Nelson, Aberdeen
Julia Orr, Aberdeen
Tia Swiontek, Aberdeen
Lily Tobin, Aberdeen
Austin Wagemann, Aberdeen
Cora Wager, Aberdeen

Ashley Wandry, Aberdeen
Benjamin Wirth, Aberdeen
Ayden Murray, Brandon
Tanner Nifong, Brandon
Brynlee Lokkeberg, Colton
Peyton Melius, Faulkton
Kaylin Achen, Frederick
Regan Leicht, Groton
Jaida Klanchnik, Huron
Hailey Bierman, Ipswich
Angeline Rye, Ipswich
Emily Palmer, Langford
Avery Wolff, Leola
Abigail Brooks, Madison
Lane Hedglin, Pierre
Lydia Boock, Rapid City
Charity Lee, Roscoe
Karina Ramirez, Roscoe
Vanessa Klein, Rosholt
Randi Schuster, Roslyn
Alexandra Zwaschka, Spearfish
Landon Leidholt, Warner
Summer Scepaniak, Warner
Dawson Schmidt, Watertown
Delanie Tschakert, Watertown
Josie Mehling, Wessington
Cassidy Slykhuis, Woonsocket

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Additional Fees & Taxes: Price excludes Regional Sports Fee of up to \$9.99/mo. (which is extra & applies to CHOICE and/or MAS ULTRA and higher Pkgs.), applicable use tax expense surcharge on retail value of installation, custom installation, equipment upgrades/add-ons (min. \$99 one-time & \$7/mo. monthly fees for each extra receiver/ DIRECTV Ready TV Device), and certain other add'l fees & charges. See directv.com/directv-fees for additional details. Different offers may apply for eligible multi-dwelling unit and teleo customers. DIRECTV SELECTIONS: Subject to Equipment Lease & Customer Agreements. Must maintain min. base TV pkg of \$29.99/mo. Programming, pricing, terms and conditions subject to change at any time. Some offers may not be available through all channels and in select areas. Visit directv.com/legal or call for details. ©2021 NFL SUNDAY TICKET OFFER: Subject to change. Package consists of all live out-of-market NFL games (based on customer's service address) broadcast on FOX and CBS. However, games broadcast by your local FOX or CBS affiliate, and select International games, will not be available in NFL SUNDAY TICKET. Games available via remote viewing based on device location. Other conditions apply. 2021 NFL SUNDAY TICKET regular full-season retail price is \$299.94. 2021 NFL SUNDAY TICKET MAX regular full-season retail price is \$399.94. Customers activating CHOICE Package or above or MAS ULTRA Package or above will be eligible to receive the 2021 season of NFL SUNDAY TICKET MAX at no additional cost. NFL SUNDAY TICKET subscription will not automatically renew. Only one game may be accessed remotely at any given time. Compatible device/operating system required for online/mobile access. Additional data charges may apply. Visit directv.com/nfl for a list of compatible devices/system requirements. 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Programming and content subj. to change. Upon cancellation of your video service you may lose access to HBO Max. Limits: Access to one HBO Max account per DIRECTV account holder. May not be combinable w/other offers, credits or discounts. To learn more, visit directv.com/hbo.com. HBO MAX is used under license. ©2021 DIRECTV, DIRECTV and all other DIRECTV marks are trademarks of DIRECTV, LLC. All other marks are the property of their respective owners.

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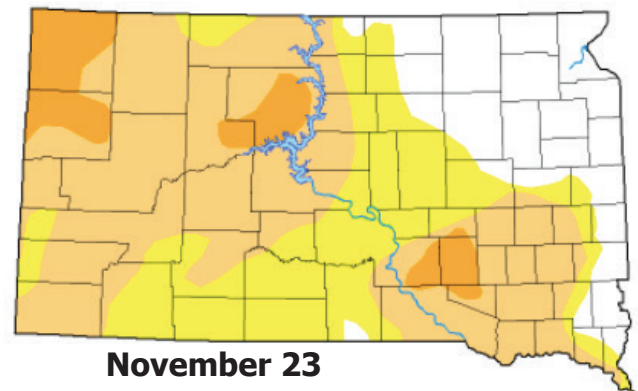
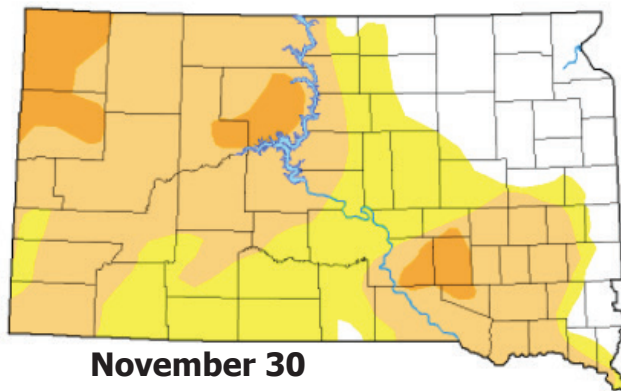
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Drought Classification



Drought Monitor



High Plains

Little to no precipitation fell across the High Plains region this week. Reassessment of the last 2 months' precipitation led to contraction of moderate drought in northeast North Dakota and severe drought in the central part of the state. But water levels in ponds and dugouts remained low in spite of late summer to early fall rains, thus prompting expansion of severe drought in other parts of central North Dakota. Above-average temperatures and no precipitation for the last 2 weeks resulted in expansion of moderate drought in southern parts of North Dakota and adjacent South Dakota. In Wyoming, many basins had below to well below normal snowpack with no snow across the High Plains portion of the state, and snow, where it has occurred, was confined to the highest peaks (above 8500 ft). The snow conditions combined with excessive evapotranspiration, drying soils, short-term dryness, and longer-term dryness to prompt expansion of moderate to extreme drought in parts of the state. In Colorado, drying soils, high evapotranspiration, low mountain snowpack, and mounting precipitation deficits resulted in expansion of moderate to extreme drought in many parts of the state. November 28 USDA statistics had 84% of Colorado's topsoil short or very short of moisture and 33% of the winter wheat in poor to very poor condition. Abnormal dryness and moderate drought expanded in southern and western parts of Kansas.

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The sunrise was very vibrant Wednesday morning.

(Photo by Paul Kosel)

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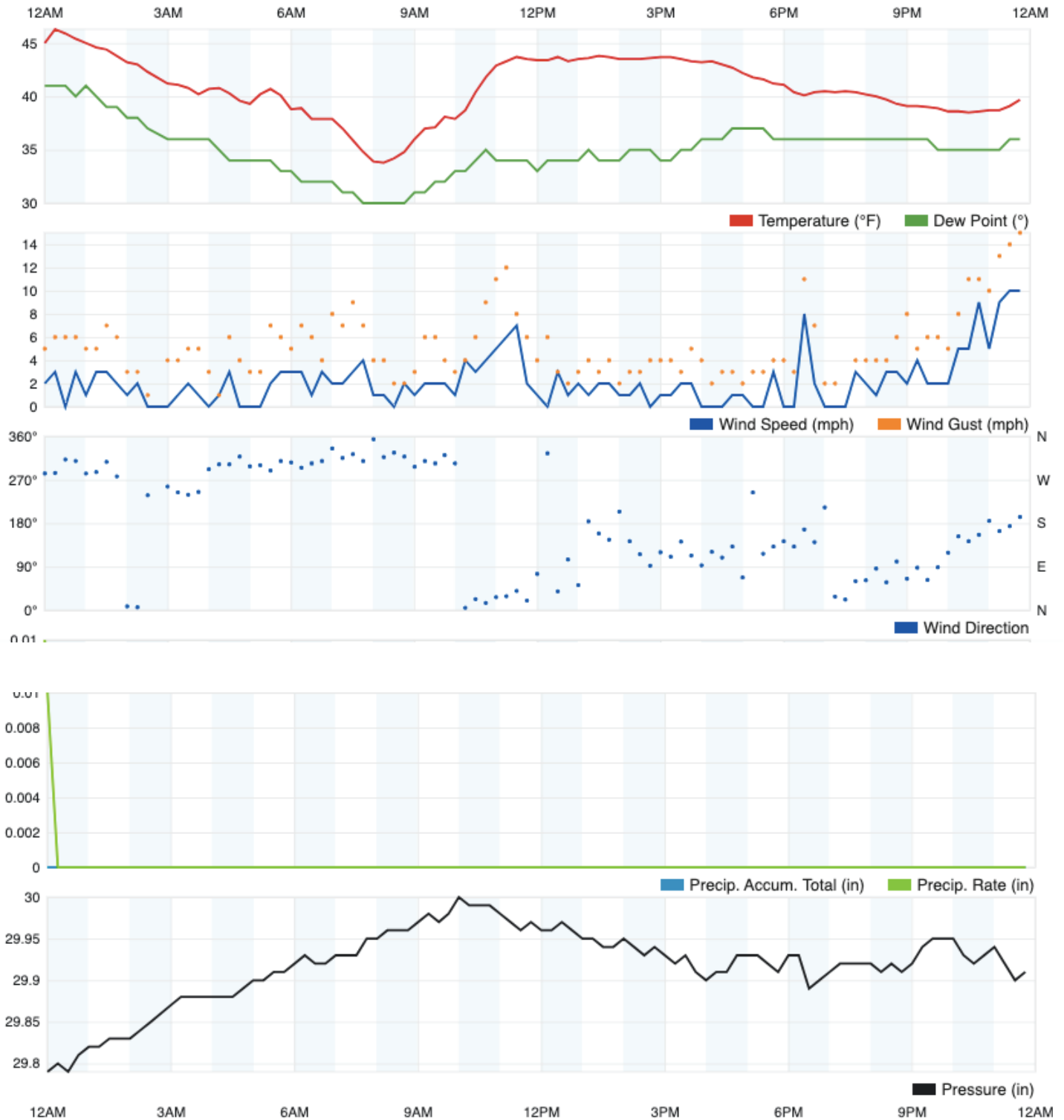
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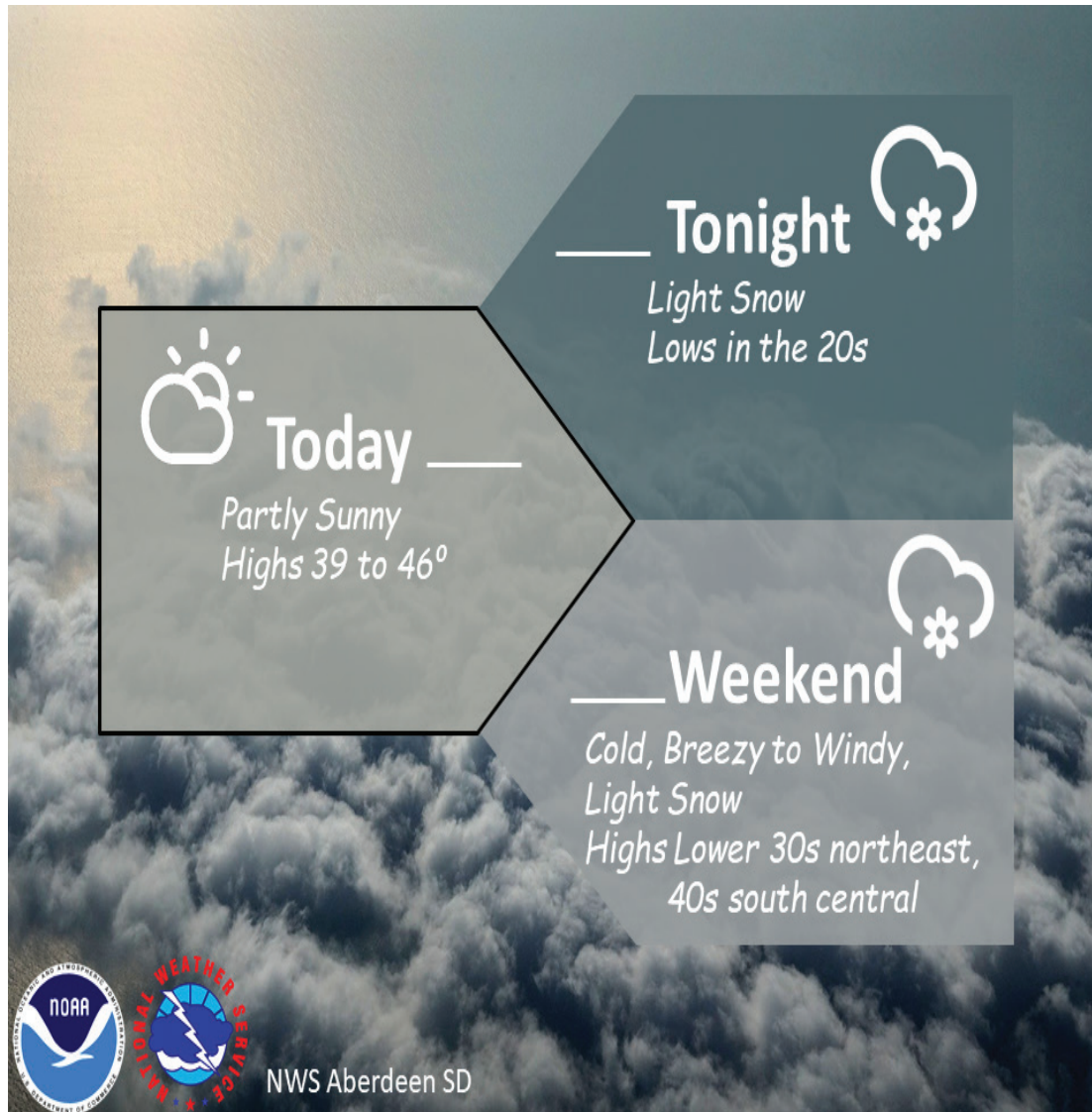
Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Saturday	Saturday Night	Sunday
				
Mostly Sunny	Mostly Cloudy then Slight Chance Snow	Chance Snow	Chance Snow	Breezy. Partly Sunny then Slight Chance Snow
High: 43 °F	Low: 23 °F	High: 36 °F	Low: 26 °F	High: 35 °F



Today
Partly Sunny
Highs 39 to 46°

Tonight
Light Snow
Lows in the 20s

Weekend
Cold, Breezy to Windy,
Light Snow
Highs Lower 30s northeast,
40s south central

 NWS Aberdeen SD

High pressure will bring dry but cool weather today. The weekend will be breezier and colder for most of the region with periods of light snow, especially across the north.

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Today in Weather History

December 3, 1991: Strong northwesterly winds behind a departing surface low brought blizzard conditions and dangerously cold wind chill readings across west central and southwest Minnesota on the 3rd. A general 1 to 3-inch snowfall occurred across the area and combined with winds gusting to 50 mph at times to generate whiteout conditions from the morning into the evening. Air temperatures coupled with the strong wind to produce wind chill values ranging from 30 to 50 below zero. Some schools and businesses were closed during the morning as the storm intensified. Several car accidents and jackknifed tractor-semitrailers littered roadways. Many roads were closed at the height of the storm. Power outages occurred over a small portion of the area due to the strong winds downing ice-covered power lines.

December 3, 1838: Cleveland Abbe, an American meteorologist, and advocate of time zones was born on this day. He was trained as an astronomer and was appointed the director of the Cincinnati Observatory in 1868. He eventually turned to meteorology and inaugurated a public weather service that served as a model for today's National Weather Service.

1856 - A severe blizzard began to rage across Iowa and Kansas. It produced as much as 16 inches of snow in Iowa. (David Ludlum)

1926 - Yuma, AZ, was soaked with 1.10 inch of rain, and by the 10th of the month had received 4.43 inches, making it the wettest December of record. The average annual rainfall for Yuma is 3.38 inches. (3rd-10th) (The Weather Channel)

1983 - Birmingham, AL, was drenched with 9.22 inches of rain in 24 hours. The rains caused severe flash flooding which literally submerged traffic. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Stormy weather in the northwestern U.S. finally began to abate, but not before Gold Beach OR was drenched with 7.94 inches of rain in 24 hours. Low pressure spread snow from the Upper Mississippi Valley to the Central Appalachians. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Gale force winds ushered cold air into the northeastern U.S., and produced snow squalls in the Lower Great Lakes Region. Winds gusted to 48 mph at Buffalo NY. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Heavy snow and high winds created blizzard conditions in northern New England. Snowfall totals in Maine ranged up to 31 inches, at Limestone. Presque Isle ME reported a record 30 inches of snow in 24 hours, along with wind gusts to 46 mph. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

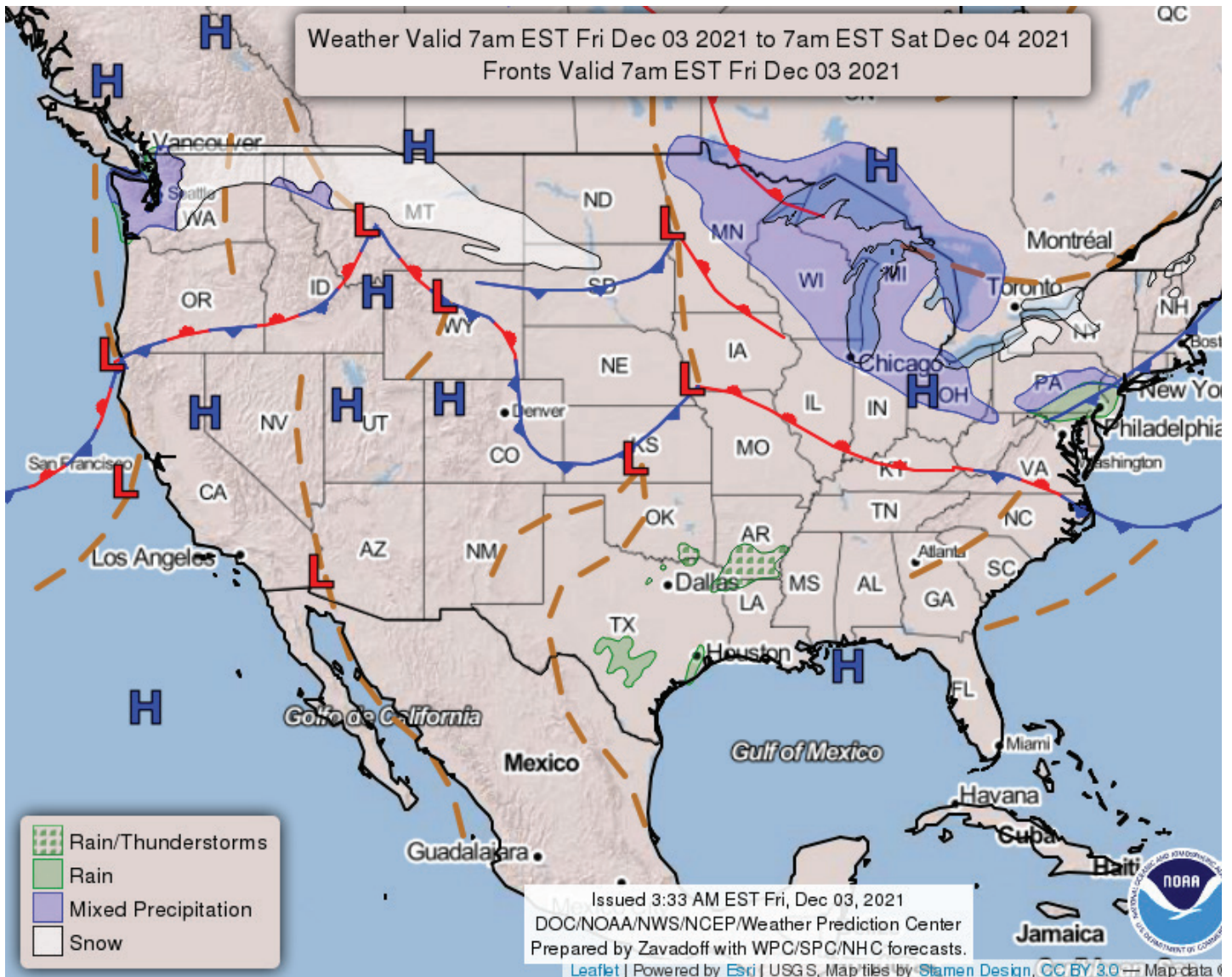
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 46.3 °F at 12:15 AM
Low Temp: 33.8 °F at 8:15 AM
Wind: 15 mph at 11:45 PM
Precip: 0.01

Record High: 63° in 1941
Record Low: -18° in 1905
Average High: 34°F
Average Low: 12°F
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.06
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.06
Average Precip to date: 21.27
Precip Year to Date: 19.92
Sunset Tonight: 4:51:49 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:54:01 AM



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WHAT GIFT?

Joyce fell behind in her Christmas shopping and suddenly realized that she had neglected to purchase cards for her friends. Hurriedly, she ran to the "surprise" section of a large greeting card store and purchased 100 cards with a beautiful scene of a family gathered in front of a glowing fireplace enjoying its warmth.

Returning home she hastily signed each of the cards without reading the message. Several days later she was sitting with her husband reviewing the guest list for a family dinner. She decided to show him the card she had sent to their friends.

After looking at the picture, she opened the card and read the verse to Jason, her husband: "This card is sent to you to say, A lovely gift is on the way!" Quite a surprise!

God gave us a "star" to alert us that His "lovely gift" would be discovered in a manger – His son. All of the books of the Bible describe the Gift that He promised to send, tell us the reason for His gift, and what we can enjoy now and in the life to come because of His gift.

But, as with every gift, there are two parts: one is the giver and the other is the receiver. An angel rejoiced and proclaimed: "For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior which is Christ the Lord." That is God the Giver, giving. And, John said, "As many as received Him...to them He gave life." But that is our choice: the receiver - to accept God's gift, His Son.

Prayer: We thank You, Father, for the Gift of life You provided for each of us in Your Son. May we accept Your Gift in faith believing, that He came to save us. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: John 1:12 But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name.

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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

South Dakota woman sentenced in 1981 death of infant son

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A South Dakota judge on Thursday sentenced a woman to 10 years in the state prison system for her infant son's 1981 death that went unsolved for decades.

Judge Bradley Zell called the sentencing of 60-year-old Theresa Bentaas a difficult decision that he labored for weeks, in part because it was not clear whether her son died from complications during birth or abandonment in the South Dakota cold. Zell suspended nine years of the sentence, meaning Bentaas will likely spend two months in state prison and serve the rest of her time under community supervision.

"This is a terribly sad and difficult human event which now needs to be brought to conclusion," Zell said, acknowledging that the sentence was likely a bitter pill for both Bentaas' family that had begged for her to go free and community members who had pressed for a strict punishment.

Bentaas had entered an "Alford plea" to a first-degree manslaughter charge, meaning that she maintained her innocence but agreed to be sentenced as convicted guilty. Prosecutors dropped first- and second-degree murder charges in the plea deal.

Lawyers defending her maintained that Bentaas had not killed her son, but rather he died soon after a birth that was not expected, even by his mother.

A psychologist who interviewed Bentaas as part of a forensic psychiatric evaluation diagnosed her with "complete pregnancy denial syndrome," saying she did not recognize her pregnancy until she woke up in the middle of the night in the pains of childbirth.

The psychologist, Dr. Cara Angelotta of Northwestern University, told the court on a video call that Bentaas described her infant son as "lifeless" and "ghost-like" immediately after his birth, but did not remember other details of that night. She said the shock of the birth could have severely impaired Bentaas' memory.

The infant's death was uncovered by the curiosity of two men, witnesses said Thursday. First, Lee Litz told the court he was test driving a jeep with several friends on Feb. 28, 1981 when he spotted blankets in a ditch.

"My curiosity got the best of me and I went over to see what it was," he told the court Thursday. "That's when I found Andrew laying there with his back towards me."

An autopsy determined that the infant likely died from failure to assist in maintaining an airway during his birth and exposure, the Sioux Falls Argus Leader reported. Recently, a doctor who consulted with Bentaas' defense found that the infant did not die from hypothermia. Police were unable to find the infant's parents and the case quickly went cold. The baby was buried with a headstone that named him Andrew John Doe.

But nearly three decades later, the curiosity of a Sioux Falls detective, Michael Webber, revived the case. He was moving boxes of case files when he spotted "an old, weathered box" scrawled with the word "murder." It contained cold cases, including the infant's file.

The case intrigued Webber and he started working on it in his spare time.

Webber said he did not initially have much to go on — an "extremely small" case file listing physical evidence that had been destroyed. But in 2009, the infant's body was exhumed for DNA evidence.

Initial searches for a family tree came back void. However, in 2019 — once DNA technology progressed and sampling had become more prevalent — a match was revealed. It soon led detectives to a family tree in the Sioux Falls area. Webber said after police suspected Bentaas as the mother and Dirk Bentaas as the father, they found DNA samples in their trash that confirmed them as the parents.

Bentaas was arrested in 2019. After several delays in her trial, she entered the "Alford plea" in October.

During Thursday's hearing, Bentaas' family begged the judge for a lenient sentence, saying she was a caring mother and grandmother who had carried the secret of her first child's death for years.

Bentaas' daughter, Melissa Pheilmeier, told the court, "Andrew and my mother are victims of their situation, victims of the culture and the stigma of a young, unwed pregnant girl in 1981."

Indigenous gamers advocate for representation and education

By JESSICA MUNDIE Religion News Service

(RNS) — Marlon Weekusk, a member of the Onion Lake Cree Nation from Saskatoon, in central Canada, is known by his icon: a howling white wolf that has held significance for him throughout his spiritual journey as a Cree. Those who know him expect conversations about tokenizing Indigenous people and representation of Cree characters in the video games he plays for fun and profit — Call of Duty and Dead by Daylight.

Weekusk is a streamer — an expert video gamer who plays for a public of mostly other avid gamers — and like other Indigenous streamers, he offers running commentary while he plays: critiques of popular games, opinions about streaming platforms like Twitch, YouTube Gaming and Facebook Gaming and stories about his culture and spirituality.

As well known as Weekusk's identity is to his fans in the small world of Indigenous gaming, he realizes that he and his culture go almost completely unrecognized in the greater gaming world. And he is determined to change that by educating the online world while empowering other Indigenous content creators.

This content is written and produced by Religion News Service and distributed by The Associated Press. RNS and AP partner on some religion news content. RNS is solely responsible for this story.

Weekusk said that on Indigenous reserves, sports tend to be the main pastime for kids, but "there are a lot of Indigenous youth that just don't fit into the sports area," he said.

Weekusk fit into the latter category. He and his siblings and cousins spent hours sitting around their TV chatting. He said it was a time to escape.

Today, Weekusk, a commerce student at the University of Saskatchewan who is married with two children, livestreams on his own channel, Marmar Gaming.

Weekusk occasionally features a Cree word of the day during his streams, explaining its meaning and origins. He also answers questions from viewers: What is the significance of offering tobacco? What is a powwow? What does he think about Indigenous characters in video games?

In a recent stream, Weekusk discussed the controversy surrounding the Chief Poundmaker character in the game Civilization VI. The game developers have been accused of cultural appropriation by the Poundmaker Cree Nation.

Weekusk said his goal is to show that Indigenous streamers can occupy this creative space and do it successfully. He wants to motivate and inspire other Indigenous people to take on similar roles. "Gaming has allowed me to be a positive role model for young Indigenous kids," he said.

"I'm not prancing around in my regalia or anything like that," said Weekusk. "I'm just sharing stories and relating to other people."

Other Indigenous streamers are bringing their cultures to their gaming platforms. Aretha Greatrix, who is from Kashechewan First Nation in the James Bay area of northern Ontario, has been streaming video games on her channel SimplyAretha for more than a year. Greatrix, who was born and raised in Edmonton, Alberta, is focused on fostering community among Indigenous streamers.

"We need to figure out who we are, so we can help support one another," she said.

Last year for Native American Heritage Month in November, Greatrix invited streamers to her channel to discuss Indigenous representation in video games as they battled live. She played games such as Never Alone, which includes Indigenous communities in its plot, and Civilization VI (despite its appropriation of Chief Poundmaker).

"I try to create space for education and conversation," said Greatrix.

Cedric Sweet, of the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma, shares his identity with viewers around the world via his channel ChiefSweet, named for his great-grandfather and great-uncle, who were both chiefs of his tribe. Sweet said he draws a mix of Indigenous and non-Indigenous viewers, which leads to lots of conversation and questions about his culture.

"There are so many Indigenous cultures," said Sweet. "And I am happy to educate and talk about mine."

Sweet, who lives in Ada, Oklahoma, said Indigenous people have flocked to video game streaming since he began in 2016. One reason for the increase, he theorizes, is that historically lamentable internet connections on reservations have slowly gotten better in the United States and Canada.

"I see so many Native streamers in the scene now, it is really blossoming," said Sweet. "I think right now is the best time to be a Native content creator."

Some, however, such as Nathan Cheechoo, from Moose Cree First Nation on Treaty 9 Territory in northern Ontario, said gamers in his home area are still waiting for better internet and more recognition. Cheechoo, who streams on his channel realswampthings, likes to advocate for the support of gaming with hopes that other Indigenous people may choose to pursue it.

Cheechoo said it is up to the streaming platforms to feature Indigenous gamers more prominently on their sites. In the past, Twitch has celebrated Black History Month and Hispanic Heritage Month. In June, Indigenous History Month in Canada, and in November, Native American Heritage Month in the United States, the platform held no such events.

"It hurts because we can bring so much to platforms across the continent, yet the support for awareness is lacking," said Cheechoo.

More support and awareness for Indigenous content creators means more opportunities, said Cheechoo. Knowing that there are companies, games, organizations and platforms that celebrate Indigenous people respectfully is important.

"This will allow for the future of Indigenous players to be proud of their identity," he said.

On the other hand, both Cheechoo and Sweet said they do not get much hate from viewers because they are Indigenous — in part, they said, because commenters do not realize that Indigenous people still exist.

"Most people assume Indigenous people are extinct," said Cheechoo. "So, we are definitely not a focus to those that like to criticize."

POET to Adopt Farmers Business Network Digital Grain Sustainability Technology Across All 33 Bioprocessing Facilities

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. & SAN CARLOS, Calif.--(BUSINESS WIRE)--Dec 2, 2021--

POET, the world's largest biofuel producer, and Farmers Business Network® (FBN®), a global Ag Tech company and farmer-to-farmer network, today announced that FBN's grain origination and carbon-scoring sustainability tech platform, GradableSM, will be adopted at all 33 of POET's ethanol bioprocessing facilities, creating the world's largest integrated infrastructure to source and sell low-carbon grain for the biofuels supply chain.

Gradable will enable POET to track attributes of individual bushels of grain—including carbon intensity—to supply low-carbon fuel markets while providing farmers who grow low carbon crops access to potential new revenue streams. POET, the world leader in ethanol production, sources more than 930 million bushels of grain annually from across the Midwest region. According to a recent study, today's bioethanol reduces carbon emissions by 46 percent compared to gasoline.

"At POET, we have always believed that farmers are the original innovators and stewards of the land," said Bob Whiteman, CFO of POET Biofuels. "Today, they want to be part of the climate solution, and we want to partner with farmers who share our vision to create a more sustainable world. Gradable is a significant step in combining agriculture, environmental sustainability, and technology to ultimately create even greener bioproducts that will drive a low-carbon future."

"Gradable is the technology platform that can pave the way for low-carbon food and fuel supply chains because global markets have been waiting for a carbon accounting system that can cost effectively collect, verify, score and track farm level carbon data," said Amol Deshpande, CEO and co-founder of Farmers Business Network. "The Gradable technology makes it possible to create premium markets for verifiably low carbon grain while ensuring that the farmers who grow low carbon crops are rewarded for their sustainable practices."

FBN's Gradable technology platform provides a modern digital infrastructure for efficient, transparent, and secure grain transactions for both farmers and grain buyers. It allows farmers to easily collect and securely submit verifiable production data, including Nitrogen fertilizer use data, which accounts for the largest share of emissions associated with grain production globally. Gradable automatically calculates individual environmental scores and supplies the environmental scores securely to premium buyers. Grain buyers only receive the environmental score associated with a farmer's delivered grain. Individual farm data is kept private and not shared with grain buyers.

POET customers who are not already using FBN now benefit from the full FBN suite of tools and services, including crop input price transparency, agronomic analytics, and on-farm R&D.

"From day one at FBN our first priority has been the profit potential of the family farm," said Devin Lamers, President of FBN Financial and Gradable. "Gradable is another step toward providing farmers with better market visibility, access and convenience. POET is one of the largest corn buyers in the world and farms will continue to benefit from their innovation and premiums for sustainably grown grain."

Not guilty pleas entered for father accused in baby's death

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Not guilty pleas have been entered for a Sioux Falls man charged in the death of his infant son.

Dylan Castimore, 22, appeared via video from the Minnehaha County Jail Wednesday on charges of murder and manslaughter in the death of 8-week-old Daxton Castimore.

An autopsy determined the baby's death was caused by a skull fracture. A contributing factor in the child's death was a lacerated liver. Court documents say the infant had several other injuries, including broken ribs.

Castimore is being held on a \$1 million cash bond.

Both charges carry a maximum of life in prison upon conviction. A preliminary hearing is set for Dec. 16.

Roe 'settled' law? Justices' earlier assurances now in doubt

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — During his confirmation to the Supreme Court, Brett Kavanaugh convinced Sen. Susan Collins that he thought a woman's right to an abortion was "settled law," calling the court cases affirming it "precedent on precedent" that could not be casually overturned.

Amy Coney Barrett told senators during her Senate confirmation hearing that laws could not be undone simply by personal beliefs, including her own. "It's not the law of Amy," she quipped.

But during this week's landmark Supreme Court hearing over a Mississippi law that could curtail if not outright end a woman's right to abortion, the two newest justices struck a markedly different tone, drawing lines of questioning widely viewed as part of the court's willingness to dismantle decades old decisions on access to abortion services.

The disconnect is raising fresh questions about the substance, purpose and theater of the Senate's confirmation process that some say is badly broken. And it's creating hard politics for Collins and another Senate Republican who supports abortion rights, Sen. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, as the nation confronts the potential unraveling of the law.

"I support Roe," Collins said as she ducked into an elevator shortly after Wednesday's arguments at the court. The Maine Republican voted to confirm Kavanaugh but opposed Barrett's nomination as too close to the 2020 presidential election.

Murkowski declined a hallway interview Thursday at the Capitol and has not provided further public comment. She opposed Kavanaugh and supported Barrett, both nominees among the most narrowly confirmed in the split Senate.

The court's ruling on the Mississippi case may not be known until June but the fallout from the week's arguments are reviving concerns that the judicial branch, like nation's other civic institutions, is becoming deeply politicized, and that the Congress — specifically the Senate — must do better in its constitutional

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role to advise and consent on presidential nominees.

"It's not like the senators have been naive and have trusted too much," said Neil Siegel, a law professor at Duke University, who has served as a special counsel to Senate Democrats, including when Joe Biden was a senator. "I think the problem is primarily that we're deeply polarized, and the Constitution makes nomination and confirmation of federal judges, including justices, a political process."

Confirmation hearings before the Senate Judiciary Committee are intense affairs, hourslong sessions that typically drag for days as one senator after another grills the president's nominees over their approach to the law.

Kavanaugh's hearing in 2018 exploded amid stunning allegations he had sexually assaulted Christine Blasey Ford when they were teenagers at a house party decades ago, claims he vehemently denied.

The abortion debates have been front and center at confirmation hearings, but senators snapped to focus as Republican Donald Trump nominated three conservative justices during his presidential term, potentially tipping the nine-member court away from centrists and liberals.

Suddenly what had been long debates over the legal precedents set by the landmark cases *Roe v. Wade* and *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* became very real-life questions for American women as Republicans reached for the long-sought goal of rolling back abortion access.

Kavanaugh repeatedly told the senators under grilling from Democrats and Republicans that the women's right to an abortion has been affirmed.

"The Supreme Court has recognized the right to an abortion since the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* case — has affirmed it many times," he told Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C.

To Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., Kavanaugh stressed "the importance of the precedent" under the previous court rulings and a "woman has a constitutional right to obtain an abortion before viability," referring to the 24 weeks of pregnancy now in question under the Mississippi law, which would lower the threshold to 15 weeks.

He won over Collins, who is not on the panel, after his assurances during a two-hour meeting.

Yet during this week's court hearing Kavanaugh read from a long list of court cases that have upturned past precedents and questioned why the court couldn't now do the same with abortion.

"If you think about some of the most important cases, the most consequential cases in this court's history, there's a string of them where the cases overruled precedent," he said.

Kavanaugh said during the court hearing that the abortion debate is "hard" and perhaps the court should throw it to the states to decide — essentially ending the federal protection.

Senators said the justices could simply be submitting a line of questioning, forcing the lawyers for the state and the federal government to respond, rather than reflecting their own reading of the law.

But Sen. Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., who had intense exchanges with Kavanaugh and Coney Barrett during the confirmation battles — and voted against both — said what she heard from the court was about what she expected.

"I'm not one bit surprised," Klobuchar said.

Barrett had told senators that *Roe v. Wade* did not fall in the category of a "super precedent," described by legal scholars as cases that are so settled there are no calls to revisit them.

Yet as a conservative Christian, she insisted one's own views don't play a role. "It's not the law of Amy," she told senators. "It's the law of the American people."

This week, Barrett pressed the lawyers to explain why women couldn't simply give up babies for adoption, now that safe haven laws exist in the states. "Why didn't you address the safe haven laws and why don't they matter?"

Asked about the disconnect between the Senate hearings and the court arguments, Sen. Richard Durbin, D-Ill., and now the Judiciary Committee chairman, acknowledged the hearings have their limits, but refrained from judgment until the court issues its ruling.

Perhaps not since Ruth Bader Ginsburg told senators during her own confirmation hearing in 1993 that the decision to bear a child is "central to a woman's right, her dignity" have nominees been as out-front

on their views. The norm now is for nominees to hold their views close.

"We can't ask for sworn affidavits," Durbin said. "My belief is the person and their life experience is more predictive of the outcome of future cases than any declaration they make to a committee."

Republican Sen. John Cornyn of Texas, a former judge, shrugged off the difference between what's said in committee hearings as a fact of life in politics.

"I've seen too many confirmation conversions, where people basically repudiate things they've done and said in the past in order to get confirmed, but once we've somebody gets confirmed, there's basically nothing we can do about it," said Cornyn, who voted to confirm both Kavanaugh and Barrett.

"I don't think they're a sham," he said. "I think there's useful discussions but obviously there's no consequences associated with voting in a way that's different from what you said in the hearing."

Associated Press writer Mary Clare Jalonick contributed to this report.

Study: Black, Asian Britons have higher COVID-19 death rates

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Almost two years into the pandemic, Black and other ethnic minority people in Britain are still dying with the coronavirus at higher rates than white residents, likely because of lower vaccination rates, a government-commissioned report said Friday.

The research found that vaccination has sharply reduced COVID-19 death rates for people of all ethnicities. But Black and South Asian Britons die at higher rates even though white people are more likely to test positive for the virus.

"In the first two waves, the higher death rate seen in ethnic minorities was primarily due to their higher risk of infection compared to whites — particularly in older age groups," said Dr. Raghieb Ali, the British government's independent adviser on COVID-19 and ethnicity.

In recent months, Ali said, "we are seeing lower infection rates in ethnic minorities than in white people, but rates of hospital admissions and deaths are still higher, with the pattern now matching levels of vaccine uptake in higher risk groups."

British health officials have launched information campaigns and worked with community groups and religious leaders to combat vaccine hesitancy among ethnic minorities. Ali said they have had some success, with vaccination rates in older Black African and Pakistani people seeing the biggest increase of any group in the six months before October.

But overall vaccination rates remain highest in white people and lowest in Black groups. About 90% of adults in Britain have had at least one vaccine dose, but the figure is under 80% among Asian communities and less than two-thirds among people from Black African and Black Caribbean backgrounds.

The government appointed Ali after it became clear that some ethnic groups were being hit harder than others by COVID-19.

Research has highlighted multiple factors. Some ethnic groups have higher prevalence of underlying health conditions and are more likely to live in large, multi-generational households. People from ethnic minorities also hold a big share of frontline jobs, such as taxi and mass transit drivers, that saw high infection rates early in the pandemic.

Equalities Minister Kemi Badenoch said the "understanding of how COVID-19 affects different ethnic groups has transformed since the pandemic began."

"We know now that factors like the job someone does, where they live, and how many people they live with, impacts how susceptible they are to the virus, and it's imperative that those more at risk get their booster vaccine," she said.

The U.K. government is aiming to offer everyone 18 and up a third, booster dose of vaccine by the end of January. 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.

Britain has recorded more than 145,000 coronavirus deaths, the highest toll in Europe after Russia.

EPA head tours embattled communities, says help on the way

By MATTHEW DALY Associated Press

RESERVE, La. (AP) — Michael Coleman's house is the last one standing on his tiny street, squeezed between a sprawling oil refinery whose sounds and smells keep him up at night and a massive grain elevator that covers his pickup in dust and, he says, exacerbates his breathing problems.

Coleman, 65, points to the billowing smokestacks just outside his backyard. "Oh, when the plants came in, they built right on top of us," he said. "We was surrounded by sugarcane, and now we're surrounded by (industrial) plants."

The oil company offered Coleman a buyout, but he rejected it. "I'm waiting for a fair shake," he said in an interview on the front steps of the home he has lived in for more than 50 years. In the meantime, he copes with high blood pressure, thyroid problems and other health issues that he attributes to decades of pollution from his industrial neighbors, a Marathon Petroleum refinery and a Cargill grain depot.

St. John the Baptist Parish, where Coleman lives, is part of an 85-mile (137-kilometer) stretch from New Orleans to Baton Rouge officially known as the Mississippi River Chemical Corridor, but more commonly called Cancer Alley. The region contains several hotspots where cancer risks are far above levels deemed acceptable by the Environmental Protection Agency.

EPA Administrator Michael Regan visited Coleman and other area residents on a five-day "Journey to Justice" tour that highlighted low-income, mostly minority communities adversely affected by decades of industrial pollution.

A Toxics Release Inventory prepared by EPA shows that minority groups make up 56% of those living near toxic sites such as refineries, landfills and chemical plants. Negative effects include chronic health problems such as asthma, diabetes and hypertension.

"I'm able to put faces and names with this term that we call environmental justice," Regan said at a news conference outside Coleman's ramshackle home, where a blue tarp covers roof damage from Hurricane Ida.

"This what we are talking about when we talk about 'fence-line communities' — those communities who have been disproportionately impacted by pollution and are having to live in these conditions," Regan said, gesturing to the grain elevator in front of him and refinery behind.

In nearby St. James, Regan met with Brenda Bryant, whose neighborhood is surrounded by oil storage tanks and a hulking refinery.

"We are actually sandwiched in. And I'm the meat," Bryant told Regan, who assured her that she and others he met with "will have a seat at the table" as officials develop solutions for long-ignored communities.

A former environmental regulator in his native North Carolina, Regan has made environmental justice a top priority since taking over as EPA head in March. As the first Black man to lead the agency, the issue "is really personal for me, as well as professional," Regan said in an interview.

"As I look at many of the folks in these communities, they look just like me. They look just like my son, and it's really tough to see them question the quality of their drinking water," he said.

Historically marginalized communities like St. John and St. James, along with cities such as New Orleans, Jackson, Mississippi, and Houston will benefit from the \$1 trillion bipartisan infrastructure law signed by President Joe Biden, Regan said. The law includes \$55 billion for water and wastewater infrastructure, while a sweeping climate and social policy bill pending in the Senate would pump more than twice that amount into EPA programs to clean up the environment and address water and environmental justice issues.

While legislation can help, Regan acknowledged that decades of neglect and widespread health problems among mostly Black and Brown communities won't be solved overnight. Loose permitting requirements for industrial sites, along with exclusionary zoning laws and housing practices, have long funneled racial and ethnic minorities into areas near toxic pollutants at rates far higher than the overall population.

At a congressional hearing in October, oil company executives sidestepped questions about whether refineries and other facilities are more likely to be located in low-income and minority communities.

"We've got oil refineries along the U.S. Gulf Coast, and we're very proud to be community members

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there," Shell Oil President Gretchen Watkins told Rep. Cori Bush, D-Mo.

"Your profit-driven choices threaten my life, the lives of my family, my neighbors, and our communities every single day," Bush responded.

In Louisiana, a recent inspector general's report faulted EPA for failing to protect St. John, St. James and other parishes from chloroprene and ethylene oxide, toxic chemicals used in industrial processes.

"If EPA, the federal government, the state government, the local governments had been doing things correctly, we wouldn't be here," Regan said in St. John. "There's obviously a problem with the way we have implemented our laws. And quite frankly, there may be a problem with existing law."

Environmental injustice is not limited to the South, and Regan has also visited hard-hit areas in cities such as Chicago, Detroit and Los Angeles, as well as brownfields and tribal areas in North Dakota.

"For the first time we're not questioning whether or not these environmental injustices exist," he said. "We are actually acknowledging that they do. We need to give these individuals a voice and talk about what we're going to do to solve these problems moving forward."

More immediately, Regan promised that EPA will use its enforcement power to ensure a former DuPont petrochemical plant near Coleman's home complies with federal regulations on emissions of chloroprene and other harmful chemicals. The facility is now owned by Japanese conglomerate Denka.

"We have enforcement authority that we're taking a very close look at to bring the facility in compliance — not just this facility, but all the facilities across the country who have been non-compliant, who have not honored the agreements that we have to be good neighbors and protect these communities," he told residents in St. John.

"The message here to these communities is, we have to do better and we will do better," Regan said.

SCHOOL WITHOUT WATER

Regan's first stop on the tour was at Wilkins Elementary School in Jackson, Mississippi, where students are forced to use portable restrooms outside the building because low water pressure from the city's crumbling infrastructure makes school toilets virtually unusable.

The pressure was so low on the day Regan visited that the school was closed. The next day, more than a dozen Jackson schools were closed because of a lack of water.

As the father of an 8-year-old, "my heart was broken today," Regan told The Associated Press. "It's very frustrating to see the disruptions they face."

Fourth-graders brought to the school to meet with Regan spoke of their own frustrations. Kingston Lewis, 9, said he doesn't like going outside to use the restroom in a mobile trailer.

"It takes a lot of learning time throughout our day, and it has an unpleasant scent sometimes when you go outside," he told Regan.

Principal Cheryl Brown called the school's dependence on portable toilets "degrading" and "inhuman at all levels." Mayor Chokwe Antar Lumumba called the water outages "a cycle of humiliation within our community" and an example of "what it looks like for our children when we fail to provide."

Lumumba said in an interview that his impoverished city needs about \$2 billion to fix its water infrastructure, but expects to receive far less from the infrastructure law and other federal spending. The majority Black city often "fails to get its equitable share of resources that funnel through the state" and its Republican governor and GOP-controlled legislature, he said.

AMERICAN DREAM OR 'NIGHTMARE'?

Regan also visited Gordon Plaza, a New Orleans neighborhood built on the site of a former toxic landfill, and the creosote-contaminated Kashmere Gardens neighborhood in Houston. Gordon Plaza was designated as a Superfund site in the 1990s, but dozens of mostly Black families still live there, waiting for a buyout, and many feel forgotten.

A 2019 report by Louisiana State University found that the city's Desire section, which includes Gordon Plaza, had the second-highest cancer rate in the state.

During a walking tour, neighborhood residents gave Regan a T-shirt as they urged him to remember their community's name. They cheered when he said the words "Gordon Plaza" had reached the White House. "You have my commitment that the EPA will partner with you all to solve this problem," he said.

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New Orleans Mayor LaToya Cantrell has pledged \$35 million for Gordon Plaza, but residents have heard promises before.

"You're trying to live out the American Dream — which turns out to be a nightmare — and you can't get justice, you know," said resident Earl Smothers.

"It's environmental racism," resident Lydwina Hurst told Regan. Still, Hurst said she appreciated Regan's visit and is hopeful residents will finally get the help they need.

Beverly Wright, executive director of the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice, a New Orleans-based group that hosted Regan at several Louisiana sites, said the problems Regan witnessed are "generational battles" with no easy solution.

Still, she's optimistic that "the wheels are aligning" to finally address problems that have festered locally for decades.

"I think putting a face and a name on these problems makes it personal," Wright said. "When you can taste the chemicals in your mouth and smell the toxins downwind, it's a lot more difficult to ignore."

Ukraine says Russia amassed over 94,000 troops at border

By YURAS KARMANAU Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukraine's defense minister estimated Friday that Russia has amassed more than 94,000 troops near their borders and said there is a probability of a "large-scale escalation" in late January.

Ukrainian and Western officials recently voiced alarm about a Russian troop buildup near Ukraine, saying they feared it could herald an invasion. Moscow has denied planning to invade and accused Ukraine and its Western backers of fabricating claims to cover up their own allegedly aggressive designs.

Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov told lawmakers Friday that the number of Russian troops near Ukraine and in Russia-annexed Crimea is estimated to be 94,300.

"Our intelligence service analyzes all scenarios, including the worst ones. It notes that a probability of a large-scale escalation on the part of Russia exists. The most probable time when (Russia) will be ready for the escalation is end of January," Reznikov said.

The minister noted an escalation "is a probable scenario, but not certain, and our task is to avert it."

Russia and Ukraine have remained locked in a tense tug-of-war after Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in 2014 and 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.

Repeated reports about Russia building up troops near Ukraine this year ignited concerns about the conflict intensifying, with tensions growing in recent weeks.

Russia traded fresh accusations and threats with Ukraine, the United States and its NATO allies this week. The West threatened the Kremlin with the toughest sanctions yet if it launches an invasion of Ukraine.

Russia, seeing new U.S. and European support for Ukraine's military, sternly warned that any presence of NATO troops and weapons on Ukrainian soil represents a "red line."

The Kremlin also expressed concern that Ukraine might use force to reclaim control of the country's rebel east.

Reznikov said Ukraine wouldn't do anything to provoke Russia but is prepared to respond in case of an attack.

"Ukraine is most interested in political and diplomatic resolution," the defense minister said.

Russian lawmaker Konstantin Kosachev reemphasized Friday that Russia is not planning to attack Ukraine.

"We don't have any plans to attack Ukraine. We don't have any heightened military activity near Ukraine's borders. There is no preparation underway for an offensive," Kosachev told Russia's state TV channel Russia-24.

France signs weapons mega-deal with UAE as Macron tours Gulf

By BARBARA SURK Associated Press

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NICE, France (AP) — France announced the signing Friday of a 16 billion-euro (\$18 billion) armaments mega-contract for the sale of 80 of its upgraded Rafale warplanes to the United Arab Emirates.

The French Defense Ministry said the deal was France's largest-ever weapons contract for export. It came as French President Emmanuel Macron is in the Emirates on the first stop of a two-day visit to the Persian Gulf. There was no immediate confirmation of the signing from Emirati officials.

Manufacturer Dassault Aviation said the UAE is buying the upgraded F4 version of its multi-role combat aircraft. That will make the Emirates Air Force the first Rafale F4 user outside of France, it said.

The deal offers a shot in the arm for France's defense industry after the collapse of a \$66 billion contract for Australia to buy 12 French submarines.

Dassault Aviation boss Eric Trappier called the sale "a French success story" and "excellent news for France and for its aeronautical industry."

The purchase marks a sizeable step up for the UAE's military capabilities in the oil- and gas-rich region. Charles Forrester, a senior analyst at Janes, said the fighter "will significantly upgrade UAE's airpower capabilities in terms of strike, air-to-air warfare, and reconnaissance."

Dassault said the Rafale will give the UAE "a tool capable of guaranteeing sovereignty and operational independence."

Macron and Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, were present at the contract signing, it said.

French defense officials were jubilant. The defense minister, Florence Parly, said the deal "directly contributes to regional stability."

France has deep ties to the United Arab Emirates, a federation of seven sheikdoms on the Arabian Peninsula, particularly since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. The UAE opened a French naval base in 2009 at Abu Dhabi's Port Zayed. French warplanes and personnel are also stationed at Al-Dhafra Air Base, a major facility outside the Emirati capital of Abu Dhabi that's also home to several thousand American troops.

Macron's keen interest in forging personal relationships with Abu Dhabi's crown prince and his counterpart in Saudi Arabia, Mohamed bin Salman Al Saud, makes him a welcome guest in the region. Both Gulf leaders value a degree of pragmatism when discussing democracy and human rights — issues on which their countries have been heavily criticized by rights groups and European lawmakers — while pursuing business opportunities.

Months after Macron was elected in 2017, he traveled to the UAE to inaugurate Louvre Abu Dhabi, built under a \$1.2 billion agreement to share the name and art of the world-famous museum in Paris.

In September, Macron hosted Abu Dhabi's crown prince at the historic Chateau de Fontainebleau outside Paris, which was restored in 2019 with a UAE donation of 10 million euros (\$11.3 million).

The UAE and France have also become increasingly aligned over a shared mistrust of Islamist political parties across the Middle East, and backed the same side in Libya's civil strife.

A senior French presidency official who spoke to reporters ahead of the trip on customary condition of anonymity said Macron will "continue to push and support the efforts that contribute to the stability of the region, from the Mediterranean to the Gulf."

Gulf tensions will be discussed, the official said, in particular the revived talks about Iran's nuclear deal with world powers, following the U.S. withdrawal from the agreement by President Donald Trump. Gulf countries have long been concerned by Iran's nuclear ambitions and influence across the region, particularly in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon.

"This is a hot topic," the French official said, adding that Macron discussed the issues in a phone call Monday with Iran's president. He will talk about the call and the issues — including the nuclear deal talks in Vienna — with Gulf leaders, who are "directly concerned by this subject, like all of us but also because they are (Iran's) neighbors," the official said.

France, along with Germany and the U.K., thinks the 2015 nuclear agreement — with minor tweaks — is the way forward with Iran, analysts say. The UAE and Saudi Arabia have bitterly opposed the West's negotiated deal with Iran.

"Although the Gulf countries did not like the West's deal with Iran, the prospect of it falling apart acri-

moniously is also bad for them and arguably presents worse risks," said Jane Kinninmont, a London-based Gulf expert with the European Leadership Network think-tank.

"Their view has always been the West should have gotten more out of Iran before sealing the deal," Kinninmont said. "But if the West walks away with nothing, the Gulf countries are beginning to understand that their security will not improve as a result."

WHO says measures used against delta should work for omicron

By JIM GOMEZ Associated Press

MANILA, Philippines (AP) — Measures used to counter the delta variant should remain the foundation for fighting the coronavirus pandemic, even in the face of the new omicron version of the virus, World Health Organization officials said Friday, while acknowledging that the travel restrictions imposed by some countries may buy time.

While about three dozen countries worldwide have reported omicron infections, including India on Thursday, the numbers so far are small outside of South Africa, which is facing a rapid rise in COVID-19 cases and where the new variant may be becoming dominant. Still, much remains unclear about omicron, including whether it is more contagious, as some health authorities suspect, whether it makes people more seriously ill, or whether it can evade vaccine protection.

"Border control can delay the virus coming in and buy time. But every country and every community must prepare for new surges in cases," Dr. Takeshi Kasai, the WHO regional director for the Western Pacific, told reporters Friday during a virtual news conference from the Philippines. "The positive news in all of this is that none of the information we have currently about omicron suggests we need to change the directions of our response."

That means continuing to push for higher vaccination rates, abiding by social-distancing guidelines, and wearing masks, among other measures, said WHO Regional Emergency Director Dr. Babatunde Olowokure.

He added that health systems must "ensure we are treating the right patients in the right place at the right time, and so therefore ensuring that ICU beds are available, particularly for those who need them."

Kasai warned: "We cannot be complacent."

WHO has previously urged against border closures, noting they often have limited effect and can cause major disruptions. Officials in southern Africa, where the omicron variant was first identified, have decried restrictions on travelers from the region, saying they are being punished for alerting the world to the mutant strain.

Scientists are working furiously to learn more about omicron, which has been designated a variant of concern because of the number of mutations and because early information suggests it may be more transmissible than other variants, Kasai said.

A few countries in Western Pacific region are facing surges that began before omicron was identified, though COVID-19 cases and deaths in many others have decreased or plateaued, Kasai said. But that could change.

Among the places that have found the variant in the region are Australia, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, Singapore and Malaysia — and it is likely to crop up in more places.

The emergence of omicron is of particular concern for organizers of the Beijing Winter Olympic Games, now about two months away.

Beijing is adopting a series of measures to reduce the risk the virus will spread during the Games, Zhao Weidong, spokesperson for the organizing committee, told reporters at a briefing on Friday.

China has adopted a zero-tolerance policy toward COVID-19 transmission and has some of the world's strictest border controls. Games participants will have to live and compete inside a bubble, and only spectators who are residents of China and have been vaccinated and tested will be permitted at venues.

Globally, cases have been increasing for seven consecutive weeks and the number of deaths has started to rise again, too, driven largely by the delta variant and decreased use of protective measures in other parts of the world, Kasai said.

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"We should not be surprised to see more surges in the future. As long as transmission continues, the virus can continue to mutate, as the emergence of omicron demonstrates, reminding us of the need to stay vigilant," Kasai said.

He warned especially about the likelihood of surges due to more gatherings and movement of people during the holiday season. The northern winter season will also likely bring other infectious respiratory diseases, such as the flu, alongside COVID-19.

"It is clear that this pandemic is far from over and I know that people are worried about omicron," Kasai said. "But my message today is that we can adapt the way we manage this virus to better cope with the future surges and reduce their health, social and economic impacts."

This story has been updated to correct that Zhao Weidong is a spokesperson for the organizing committee for the Beijing Games, not the Foreign Ministry.

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

Iraqi region hit by migrant deaths; smuggling big business

By SAMYA KULLAB Associated Press

RANYA, Iraq (AP) — Shoes pile up outside the Mamand home in northern Iraq from relatives and friends who have streamed inside to offer solace as they anxiously await news of the family's young son, who was lost at sea somewhere between France and Britain.

Most are afraid to articulate their fear that 18-year old Twana Mamand may have drowned along with at least 26 others when their flimsy boat sank near the French coast last week. They had been bound for Britain with hopes of starting new lives.

Zana Mamand, 33, wiped away tears and vowed to take revenge against the family of the smuggler who arranged for his brother's journey. "I know him, I know his family here, I have all their phone numbers," he said.

In Ranya, a town of about 400,000 in Iraq's Kurdish-run region, the plight of the migrants seems to be a topic that everyone knows something about.

Those who want to get out ask local travel agents to connect them with smugglers in Turkey and elsewhere. Those who have returned from failed attempts hang around the main park, eager to try again. At the police station, officers say they can't stop the smugglers.

Many victims of the English Channel tragedy are believed to be Iraqi Kurds, who seem to make up the majority of Middle Eastern migrants seeking to move to the West. Although northern Iraq is more prosperous than the rest of the conflict-scarred country, growing unemployment and frustration over corruption is forcing many to consider the risky journey to Europe.

About 28,000 Iraqis left for Europe in 2021, with about 7,000 from the Raparin district that includes Ranya and the nearby town of Qaladze, said Baker Ali, head of a local association of refugees returning from Europe.

MISSING AT SEA

Twana had tried and failed five times to cross the English Channel from Calais before he boarded a small boat on the evening of Nov. 23.

The routine was the same: Ahead of each attempted crossing, smugglers would select a travel office in Ranya where Zana would deposit money.

That night, Zana spoke to his brother by phone just before midnight. He asked about the weather, the boat and the others with him.

"The boat is not good," he recalls that Twana replied, explaining it was too small, and there were 33 people waiting to cross — too many for the vessel.

They spoke again at 2:05 a.m. on Nov. 24. In a four minute call, Twana laughed and joked, telling his older brother they would be docking in an hour's time. Zana was tired, and asked his sister, Kala, who

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lives in the U.K., to stay online.

In his last message, Twana said the engine wasn't working.

A STRUGGLE TO FIND WORK

Twana was athletic and particularly adept at soccer. Zana proudly showed photos of him charging down the pitch with the ball, a look of steely determination on his face.

He didn't care much for school, doubting it would ever land him a job. But almost everyone in the family struggled to find work. Zana, a firefighter, seldom received his wages on time or in full. Sometimes, Twana would work as a laborer for 12 hours a day, earning 15,000 Iraqi dinars — about \$10.

When he turned 18, Twana said nothing would stop him from going to Europe. The trip would be costly: \$13,000 to cross from Turkey to Italy. From there, Twana would have to find his way to Calais, France. Then, it would cost another \$3,000 to cross the channel to the U.K.

With a Turkish visa, he traveled to Istanbul in September and found that there were plenty of smugglers from his home region, including Ranya and Qaladze.

Twana tried and failed three times to cross from Turkey to Italy, each with a different smuggler. The money, obtained by borrowing and putting their father's home up for sale, was deposited with a designated travel agent who pulled it back each time the ventures failed, Zana said.

When Twana finally reached Italy in late October, the travel agent sent the money, he said. The same procedure was used when Twana made it to Calais.

FINDING 'THE BEST SMUGGLERS' FOR CLIENTS

Abdullah Omar's office window offers a view of Ranya's bustling center. His agency Yaran Travel, is on the second floor, above popular tea shops.

Here, the 35 year-old travel agent summed up his business: "I help people find the best smugglers to take them to Europe."

He has high standards, he said, working only with those who have helped people reach their destination with the fewest complaints. The smugglers are his relatives, including a brother in Turkey.

He helped over 500 people this year, a number that has risen steadily, he said. Most want to go to the U.K. where they have relatives who sought asylum years earlier. Smugglers tell would-be migrants to leave a deposit with Omar once they have a visa for Turkey.

From Turkey, most are smuggled to Italy via risky sea routes. Others try for Greece or Bulgaria.

Omar acts as an intermediary between the smugglers and the migrants and their relatives in Iraq, using the so-called hawala network in Muslim countries in which individuals rather than banks act as brokers for money transfers. He only releases funds via hawala once all sides give approval.

He sometimes sends funds directly to migrants who "run out of money and sleep in train stations in Italy, or become sick," Omar said.

One smuggler from Iraq's Qaladze area said he began sneaking people into Poland from Belarus in July. It was easier than other routes, he told The Associated Press by phone, because Belarus had loosened visa restrictions, and he had a friend in Poland who drove migrants to Germany for a fee.

But after tensions mounted along the Belarus-Poland border in November, business stopped, said Shwan, who didn't give his full name because he feared getting into trouble with authorities.

THE AFTERMATH

When word reached Zana that his brother might have died, he went to the office of the agent with whom he left his deposit, and threatened him in a fit of rage. The agent told him how to reach the smuggler, who calls himself "Bashdar Ranya," a pseudonym.

Since Ranya is relatively small, Zana soon found the smuggler's family. He threatened to send information about the smuggler to his sister in the U.K. to report them to the authorities.

Zana later was contacted by the elusive smuggler via Facebook's messenger app, in which he said in a voice message that he was on the run in Germany.

Zana played the message for an AP reporter, the recording breaking the mournful silence in the Mamand household.

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"I am sorry. It was a surprise to me too," the voice said of the sinking. "I will compensate you."

Attempts by AP to reach the smuggler through a contact in France provided by Zana were unsuccessful.

Authorities can do little about the smugglers, said Hazhar Azawi, director of Kurdish security in Ranya.

"The smugglers are in Turkey. They (Iraqis) get a visa to go there, so what can we do?"

Lt. Shorsh Ismail, a spokesman for Ranya's police, said authorities are aware of the travel agencies' activities but can do nothing without an order from Kurdistan's presidency.

Omar, the travel agent, said he does not believe he is doing anything wrong, insisting: "I am helping people."

In the town's nearby park, 24-year-old Alan Aziz recalled his own failed attempt to reach Italy. He was on a boat in the Mediterranean when the currents took him to Libya instead. He spent nearly a month there before being repatriated.

"I need his help," he said of seeing a travel agent. "I want to try again for Europe."

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

Biden, allies increasingly pushing back at GOP's virus barbs

By ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden looked out over an audience of government scientists and framed his latest plan for fighting COVID-19 as an opportunity to at last put an end to divisiveness over the virus, calling the politicization of the issue a "sad, sad commentary."

And then he tacked on a political dig.

Some people "on the other team," he said Thursday, were threatening to hold up government spending and endangering the nation's credit out of pique over vaccination requirements.

"Go figure," he added.

It was a quick aside in a Biden speech that otherwise struck a largely bipartisan tone. But it served as fresh evidence that after taking it on the chin for months, Biden and his allies are increasingly willing to hit back, casting Republicans as the true obstacle to the nation's recovery from the pandemic.

The Democratic president's efforts to confront the coronavirus have long attracted a litany of fiery statements, legal challenges and more than a few barbs from his predecessor. But Biden was elected on the promise of depoliticizing the virus response and following the science, so responding in kind wasn't seen as an option early on.

Biden aides in the early months of his presidency pressed him to ignore criticism from Republicans, arguing that responding would further inject politics into the vaccination campaign and harm his all-out effort to get Americans to roll up their sleeves.

But now, as public patience wears thin amid the emergence of the new omicron variant and some GOP lawmakers' threats to shut down the government over vaccine requirements, the White House and its allies are seizing on what they see as a political opening.

"It's clear that Republicans have decided that the fate of the Biden presidency is tied to COVID," said Democratic communications strategist Eric Schultz, who worked in the Obama White House. "And Republicans have chosen to be on the side of the virus."

With most Americans now vaccinated, the White House is less worried about turning people off with such political talk. Biden aides now doubt that some of the stubborn holdouts -- more than 40 million adults -- will get a vaccine for any reason short of their employers requiring it, minimizing the risk of backlash.

Biden did pop out a dig in August as some Republican governors moved to block mask mandates in schools.

"If you aren't going to fight COVID-19, at least get out of the way of everyone else who is trying," he said. "You know, we're not going to sit by as governors try to block and intimidate educators protecting our children."

More recently, Biden aides have grown more willing to openly condemn Republican lawmakers they view

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as obstacles to his efforts to control the pandemic.

"These supporters of the former president are advocating for shutting the federal government down so that 20% of the public who are refusing to get vaccinated or tested can be free to infect their coworkers, our children, filling hospitals — that is what they are advocating for," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said at briefing this week. "They want to shut the government down in order to advocate for people to assert that on society. So, I don't think that should be lost on us."

Privately, White House officials have been even more direct, accusing Republicans of advocating policies that would extend the pandemic, close schools and cost more lives.

Some Republican lawmakers, for their part, have pitched their opposition to the vaccine mandates as looking out for constituents being forced to choose between a shot and a job, although Biden's order offers a test-out alternative for most private sector employees. The lawmakers are seeking legislation that would prevent agencies from receiving funding to enforce the mandates.

"I have heard from hundreds of Utahns, in recent days, who are concerned about losing their jobs — losing their jobs not just in general, not just in the abstract, but specifically due to these mandates," said Sen. Mike Lee, R-Utah.

Democrats are portraying the vaccine mandates as critical to protecting the health of Americans during a pandemic, describing the Republican efforts as "anti-vaccine."

"How do they explain to the public that they are shutting down government because they don't want people to get vaccinated?" House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said Thursday when the fate of a government spending bill was uncertain. "Why don't you go ask them? This is so silly."

Democratic Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer warned that if Republicans were to block the funding bill, "It will be a Republican anti-vaccine shutdown."

The Senate did later Thursday approve a stopgap spending bill to avoid a short-term shutdown after leaders defused the standoff over vaccine mandates.

Biden's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic has long been a strong point in his public approval ratings, but it has slipped in recent months as the delta variant raged and cases and deaths increased. More than 780,000 Americans have now died from COVID-19.

An October AP-NORC poll found that 54% of Americans said they approved of Biden's job on the pandemic, higher than his approval rating overall and much higher than approval of his handling of the economy, at 48% and 41%, respectively.

Still, as recently as July, before the delta variant struck, 66% had approved of Biden on COVID-19 and 59% approved of his job performance overall.

The White House seems increasingly intent on reclaiming the high ground on COVID.

White House spokesman Andrew Bates on Thursday took to Twitter to play up a Chamber of Commerce statement offering support for the president's contention "that no business should have to shut down this winter because of COVID-19."

Bates tweeted, "Tough break for Republicans: like us, business is also opposed to the pandemic, and they similarly don't want it to kill more Americans and jobs."

AP writers Kevin Freking and Lisa Mascaro contributed to this report.

Pope laments 'hostility and prejudice' with Cypriot Orthodox

By MENELAOS HADJICOSTIS and NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

NICOSIA, Cyprus (AP) — Pope Francis lamented centuries of hostility and prejudice that have divided Catholics and Orthodox as he met Friday with the leader of Cyprus' Greek Orthodox Church and pointed to works of charity as a means to help heal the rift between Catholic West and Orthodox East.

Archbishop Chrysostomos II hosted Francis for private talks at his residence and then invited the pope to the brand new Orthodox Cathedral of St. Barnabas for an encounter with the Holy Synod, the highest decision-making body of the Greek Orthodox Church.

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Sitting in front of the gilded iconostasis, or altar, and as the Orthodox clergymen chanted, Francis lamented the "broad furrows" that history had cleaved between Catholics and Orthodox as a result of the 1,000 year-old schism, when God wanted all Christians united.

"Centuries of division and separation have made us assimilate, even involuntarily, hostility and prejudice with regard to one another, preconceptions often based on scarce and distorted information, and spread by an aggressive and polemical literature," Francis said. "This too makes crooked the path of God, which is straight and directed to concord and unity."

He said concrete joint works of charity, education and efforts to promote human dignity can help Catholics and Orthodox "rediscover our fraternity, and communion will mature by itself, to the praise of God."

In a sign of that unity, two Orthodox bishops attended Francis' Mass later Friday at Nicosia's main sports stadium for Cyprus' tiny Catholic community. The stadium, which seats 22,000, was less than half full and Francis eschewed his usual popemobile roundabout to greet the faithful before the Mass, presumably because the crowd only filled one set of stands.

There too, though, Francis urged a message of unity in a country lacerated by divisions, even among Catholics. "Healing takes place when we carry our pain together, when we face our problems together, when we listen and speak to one another," he said.

On his part, Archbishop Chrysostomos said the Cypriot church enjoys "excellent relations" with all churches and has in recent years pursued dialogue with Muslim leaders in the Middle East - an effort he said was largely ruined by "extremist elements" who "inflamed passions."

"We resolutely believe in the peaceful resolution of our differences whether those are ethnic or religious. And the only correct course is through a genuinely sincere dialogue," he said.

Although Cyprus comprises a tiny part of the Eastern Orthodox community with around 800,000 faithful, Cypriot church leaders point to the Mediterranean island's role as the "gateway" to Christianity's westward expansion owing to its proximity to the faith's birthplace.

Christianity first spread to Cyprus in 45 A.D., when the Apostle Paul converted the island's Roman governor, Sergius Paulus, while on the first stop of his first mission to spread the faith. The Cypriot Church was itself said to have been founded by another apostle, Barnabas.

Francis has made Cyprus' connection to the roots of Christianity a focal point of his visit, which ends Saturday when he heads to Greece. Cypriot Church leaders are keen to strengthen ties with the Holy See since minority Christian communities in nearby countries fear that their faith is under attack amid armed conflicts.

Cyprus itself carries the scars of war. The nation divided along ethnic lines in 1974 when Turkey invaded following a coup aimed at uniting the island with Greece. After the ethnic split, 170,000 Christians fled the breakaway Turkish Cypriot north, where churches, monasteries and other Christian monuments have been destroyed.

Tens of thousands of Muslim Turkish Cypriots fled northward following the end of hostilities.

The destruction of Christian places of worship was among the key issues that Archbishop Chrysostomos raised with Francis in hopes that the pontiff's political muscle will help reignite stalled talks to reunify Cyprus and help repatriate looted religious works of art including icons, frescoes and mosaics.

Chrysostomos appealed to the pontiff to personally intercede and help restore "respect for our cultural heritage" and "Christian culture which today are brutally violated by Turkey."

The Archbishop cited the example of Francis' predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI, who mediated with the German government to bring back 500 religious items that Turkish antiquities smugglers had spirited away to Munich.

Upon his arrival on Thursday, Francis urged Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots to resume the talks, saying threats and shows of force only prolong the "terrible laceration" the island's people have endured for nearly a half-century.

"Let us nurture hope by the power of gestures, rather than by gestures of power," Francis told Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades and other government leaders at the presidential palace, located in the in-

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ternally recognized, Greek Cypriot-led south.

Prospects for unifying the island have rarely been as bleak as they are now. Turkish Cypriots, under their newly elected leader Ersin Tatar, changed their prerequisites for peace and demanded recognition of a separate state before any deal can even be discussed.

Previously both sides had agreed — with a United Nations Security Council endorsement — that any deal would involve establishing a two-zone federation, with a Turkish Cypriot zone in the north, a Greek Cypriot one in the south and a single federal government regulating core ministries, including defense and foreign affairs.

Acknowledging the stall in talks and the continuing suffering of Christians unable to return to their former homes in the majority Muslim north, Francis encouraged an initiative of the island's Christian and Muslim faith leaders to promote reconciliation.

"Times that seem least favorable, when dialogue languishes, can be the very times that prepare for peace," the pontiff said.

EXPLAINER: Turkey's currency is crashing. What's the impact?

By SUZAN FRASER Associated Press

ANKARA, Turkey (AP) — Turkey's beleaguered currency has been plunging to all-time lows against the U.S. dollar and the euro in recent months as President Recep Tayyip Erdogan presses ahead with a widely criticized effort to cut interest rates despite surging consumer prices.

As a result, families are struggling to buy food and other goods and the Turkish lira has lost around 40% of its value since the start of the year, becoming one of the world's worst-performing currencies.

Here is a closer look at the Turkish currency crisis and its impact on a country with eye-popping inflation:
WHAT IS GOING ON?

Turkey's Central Bank has cut borrowing costs by 4 percentage points since September, in line with Erdogan's wishes, even though inflation accelerated to around 20%.

Erdogan, who has been in power for some 19 years and has grown increasingly authoritarian, has long argued that high interest rates cause inflation, contrary to what economists generally say: that increasing rates will drive down prices.

The rate cuts have raised concerns over the bank's independence, while the country's unconventional monetary policy has spooked foreign investors, who are dumping Turkish assets. And Turkish citizens are rushing to convert their savings to foreign currencies and gold to protect them from soaring inflation.

"People bring their savings and always want to buy dollars. When will it end, where will this go? They're panicking," said Hulya Orak, a currency exchange office worker. "People are constantly in panic mode and are using money that's under their mattresses."

As a result, the Turkish lira, which had barely recovered from a currency crisis in 2018, has been weakening to record lows against the dollar and the euro.

It crashed to a record low of 13.44 against the American currency on Nov. 23 after Erdogan insisted there would be no turning back from his unconventional policies. On Tuesday, the lira plummeted again to an all-time low of 14 against the dollar after Erdogan reiterated that cuts would continue and amid signs the U.S. Federal Reserve would tighten credit for consumers and businesses as inflation rises.

The lira recovered a bit Wednesday after Turkey's Central Bank announced it was intervening in the foreign exchange market to stem the volatility.

HOW HAVE PEOPLE BEEN AFFECTED?

With inflation running at more than 21%, according to official figures released Friday, the prices of basic goods have soared and many people in this country of more than 83 million are struggling to make ends meet.

The independent Inflation Research Group, made up of academics and former government officials, puts the inflation rate at a stunning 58%. Turkey's opposition parties have long voiced skepticism over the official inflation figures and have questioned the Turkish Statistical Institute's independence.

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The devalued lira is driving prices higher, making imports, fuel and everyday goods more expensive in Turkey, which relies on imported raw material. Meanwhile, rents have skyrocketed and prices for home sales, mostly pegged on the dollar, are increasing.

Every morning, long lines form outside kiosks selling bread a lira cheaper than in bakeries and shops. "We are cutting down on everything," Sinasi Yukselen said as he waited in line. "I used to buy 10 loaves, now I buy five. We've given up trying to buy meat."

At a shopping center selling discounted goods in Ankara, Emine Cengizer said she wanted to buy her teenage daughter a winter coat but left empty-handed.

"If I buy the coat, we won't have anything to eat for the rest of the week," she said.

Selva Demiralp, economics professor at Istanbul's Koc University, says she's concerned about a possible brain drain.

"When your salary gap between what you can earn in Turkey versus what you can earn abroad widens so much, it's just going to be very difficult for us to keep those highly educated white-collar people at home," she said. "And that's that's a major threat for the future of the country."

WHAT IS ERDOGAN'S ECONOMIC POLICY?

The Turkish president has been pushing for low borrowing costs to stimulate the economy, boost growth and exports, and create jobs. He has vowed to break the cycle of an economy dependent on short-term "hot money" lured by high interest rates.

Economists say raising borrowing costs eases inflation, which has been surging worldwide as the economy recovers from the coronavirus pandemic but is especially acute in Turkey because of the government's unorthodox policies.

A devout Muslim, whose religion regards usury as a sin, Erdogan has described interest rates as "the mother and father of all evil." He has fired three central bank governors who resisted lowering rates. In a further shake-up, Erdogan on Thursday appointed a new finance minister considered to be supportive of the push for low borrowing rates, leading to a slight decline of the lira.

"With the new economic model, we are pushing back the policy of attracting money with high interest rates. We are supporting production and exports with low interests," Erdogan said this week.

The Turkish leader has blamed the currency crash on foreign forces bent on destroying Turkey's economy and says his government is waging "an economic war of independence."

Demiralp, the economist, says the government is doing the opposite of what is normally done to tamp down prices.

"The central bank claims that by cutting interest rates, they're going to contain inflationary pressures. The markets are not buying this story," she said.

Turkey is focused on growing the economy rather than controlling inflation, Demiralp said, "but I think even growth is highly questionable at this point because you are going to see more contraction coming as a result of the panic and uncertainty and escalating costs coming from this crisis."

WHAT'S THE POLITICAL IMPACT FOR ERDOGAN?

His early years in power were marked by a strong economy that helped him win several elections. Recently, soaring consumer prices have hurt his popularity, with opinion polls pointing at unease over his economic policies even among supporters.

Last week, police broke up small demonstrations that erupted in Istanbul and several other Turkish cities by groups protesting the high cost of living. Dozens of people were detained.

An alliance of opposition parties that have formed a bloc against Erdogan's ruling party and its allies has been climbing in opinion polls. Members of the opposition coalition are calling for early elections and accusing Erdogan of "treason" for mismanaging the economy.

Erdogan has refused to call early elections, insisting voting will take place as scheduled in 2023.

He said this week that the government is working on programs that would create 50,000 new jobs and it is expected to raise the minimum wage.

"We are preparing to, one by one, take steps to comfort citizens whose purchasing power has fallen," Erdogan said.

Trump faces flurry of investigations beyond Jan. 6 probe

By MICHAEL R. SISAK, KATE BRUMBACK and JILL COLVIN Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — As Donald Trump's lawyers try to block the White House from releasing records to the congressional committee investigating the Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection, the former president faces a flurry of other investigations that could come to a head in the coming weeks and the new year.

That includes two major state criminal investigations — one in New York and one in Georgia — and lawsuits concerning sexual assault allegations, a fight over an inheritance and questions of whether he should be held personally liable for inciting the insurrection.

Trump has long dismissed the investigations as nothing more than a politically motivated "witch hunt" that began with the probe into Russian meddling in the 2016 election. But while Trump has spent most of his life dodging legal consequences, he is no longer shielded by the protections against indictment enjoyed by sitting presidents. And any charges — which would be the first against a former president in the nation's history — could affect both his businesses and his future political prospects as he mulls running for a second term.

Here's the latest on where the cases stand:

NEW YORK

New York prosecutors are investigating the former president's business dealings and recently convened a new grand jury to hear evidence after the previous panel's term ran out.

The Manhattan district attorney's office is weighing whether to seek more indictments in the case, which resulted in tax fraud charges in July against Trump's company, the Trump Organization, and its longtime chief financial officer, Allen Weisselberg. They are accused of cheating tax authorities through lucrative, untaxed fringe benefits.

Weisselberg is due back in court in July 2022.

Trump himself remains under investigation after District Attorney Cyrus Vance Jr., who is leaving office at the end of the year, spent years fighting to access the former president's tax records. Prosecutors have also been considering whether to seek charges against the company's chief operating officer, Matthew Calamari Sr.

Investigators working for Vance and New York Attorney General Letitia James have spent more than two years looking at whether the Trump Organization misled banks or tax officials about the value of the company's assets, inflating them to gain favorable loan terms or minimizing them to reap tax savings.

"I think it's pretty clear that our investigation is active and ongoing," Vance said Tuesday.

James' office is involved in Vance's criminal probe and is conducting its own civil investigation.

Separately, Trump is facing scrutiny over properties he owns in the New York City suburbs. The New York Times reported in October that Westchester County District Attorney Mimi E. Rocah subpoenaed records from both the Trump National Golf Club in Westchester and the town of Ossining as it investigates whether Trump's company misled officials to cut taxes for a golf course there.

GEORGIA

In Atlanta, Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis opened an investigation in January into possible attempts to interfere with the administration of the state's 2020 election, which Trump narrowly lost.

In letters sent in February to top elected officials in the state — including Gov. Brian Kemp and Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger — Willis instructed them to preserve all records related to the election, particularly those that may contain evidence of attempts to influence election officials.

The investigation includes a Jan. 2 phone call between Trump and Raffensperger in which Trump repeatedly and falsely asserts that the Republican secretary of state could change the certified results of the presidential election. A recording of the call was obtained the next day by multiple news organizations, including The Associated Press.

"I just want to find 11,780 votes, which is one more than we have," Trump said. "Because we won the state."

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Willis has been relatively tight-lipped about the investigation, but her office has confirmed it is ongoing. "All available evidence is being analyzed, whether gathered by this office, another investigative body or made public by the witnesses themselves. A decision on whether criminal charges are appropriate against any individual will be made when that process is complete," spokesperson Jeff DiSantis said in an email.

Among the sources sure to be examined by Willis' team is a book written by Raffensperger and published Nov. 2. It includes a transcript of the Jan. 2 call with Trump annotated with the secretary of state's observations, including his belief that the president was threatening him at multiple points.

Willis earlier this year said she was also interested in the circumstances surrounding the sudden resignation on Jan. 4 of Bjay Pak, the U.S. attorney in Atlanta. Pak told the Senate Judiciary Committee that he had originally planned to stay in the position until Inauguration Day, Jan. 20, but resigned weeks earlier because of pressure from Trump.

WASHINGTON

The attorney general for the District of Columbia, Karl Racine, said early this year that district prosecutors were investigating Trump's role in the Jan. 6 insurrection and considering whether to charge him under a local law that criminalizes statements that motivate people to act violently.

There has been no indication, however, that that is likely. If Trump were to be charged, it would be a low-level misdemeanor, with a maximum sentence of six months in jail.

LAWSUITS

In addition to the criminal probes underway, Trump also faces a number of civil suits, from scorned business investors, to his estranged niece, to Democratic lawmakers and Capitol Police officers who blame him for inciting the violence on Jan. 6.

That includes a lawsuit brought by the House Homeland Security chair, Democratic Rep. Bennie Thompson, under a Reconstruction-era law called the Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871, which prohibits violence or intimidation meant to prevent members of Congress or other federal officials from carrying out their constitutional duties.

In October, Trump was questioned behind closed doors under oath in a deposition for a lawsuit brought by protesters who say his security team assaulted them outside Trump Tower in the early days of his presidential campaign in 2015.

Trump is also facing a defamation case brought by columnist E. Jean Carroll, who says Trump raped her in the mid-1990s in an upscale Manhattan department store. Trump has said that Carroll is "totally lying" and that she is "not my type." U.S. Justice Department lawyers argued earlier this year that Trump cannot be held personally liable for "crude and disrespectful" remarks he made about a woman who accused him of rape because he made the comments while he was president. The 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals is set to hear oral arguments in the case Friday.

Trump had faced a similar defamation lawsuit from Summer Zervos, a former "Apprentice" contestant who had accused Trump of kissing and groping her against her will in 2007, but she unexpectedly dropped the suit last month.

Separately, Trump's estranged niece, Mary Trump, has sued him and other family members, accusing them of defrauding her of millions of dollars of inheritance money. Trump has filed his own suit against Mary Trump and The New York Times over a 2018 story about his family's finances that was based partly on confidential documents she provided to the paper. He accuses her of breaching a settlement agreement that barred her from disclosing the documents.

Lawyers for Mary Trump filed paperwork Thursday seeking to dismiss her uncle's lawsuit against her.

Brumback reported from Atlanta. Associated Press writer Eric Tucker contributed to this report from Washington.

'We just feel it': Racism plagues US military academies

By AARON MORRISON, HELEN WIEFFERING and NOREEN NASIR Associated Press

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Eight years after he graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, Geoffrey Easterling remains astonished by the Confederate history still memorialized on the storied academy's campus – the six-foot-tall painting of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee in the library, the barracks dormitory named for Lee and the Lee Gate on Lee Road.

As a Black student at the Army academy, he remembers feeling “devastated” when a classmate pointed out the slave also depicted in the life-size Lee painting. “How did the only Black person who got on a wall in this entire humongous school — how is it a slave?” he recalls thinking.

As a diversity admissions officer, he later traveled the country recruiting students to West Point from underrepresented communities. “It was so hard to tell people like, ‘Yeah, you can trust the military,’ and then their kids Google and go ‘Why is there a barracks named after Lee?’” he said.

The nation's military academies provide a key pipeline into the leadership of the armed services and, for the better part of the last decade, they have welcomed more racially diverse students each year. But beyond blanket anti-discrimination policies, these federally funded institutions volunteer little about how they screen for extremist or hateful behavior, or address the racial slights that some graduates of color say they faced daily.

In an Associated Press story earlier this year, current and former enlistees and officers in nearly every branch of the armed services described a deep-rooted culture of racism and discrimination that stubbornly festers, despite repeated efforts to eradicate it.

Less attention has been paid to the premiere institutions that produce a significant portion of the services' officer corps – the academies of the U.S. Army, the U.S. Navy, the U.S. Air Force, the U.S. Coast Guard and U.S. Merchant Marine.

Some graduates of color from the nation's top military schools who endured what they described as a hostile environment are left questioning the military maxim that all service members wearing the same uniform are equal.

That includes Carlton Shelley II, who was recruited to play football for West Point from his Sarasota, Florida, high school and entered the academy in 2009. On the field, he described the team as “a brotherhood,” where his skin color never impacted how he was treated. But off the field, he said, he and other Black classmates too often were treated like the stereotype of the angry Black man – an experience that brought him to tears at the time.

“I was repeatedly in trouble or being corrected for infractions that were not actually infractions,” he said. “It was a very deliberate choice to dig and to push on certain individuals compared with other cadets -- white cadets.”

Xavier Bruce, who graduated from the Air Force Academy in 1999 and rose to the rank of lieutenant colonel during his 24 years of duty, said that for him, it was the ongoing slights directed at him as a Black man, rather than openly racist behavior, that cut deep.

“We just feel it, we feel the energy behind it, and it just eats us away,” he said.

Some students of color have spotlighted what they see as systemic racism and discrimination at the academies by creating Instagram accounts — “Black at West Point,” “Black at USAFA” and “Black at USNA” — to relate their personal experiences.

“I was walking with a classmate and we were both speaking Spanish when a white, male upperclassman turned around and said ‘Speak English, this is America,’” a 2020 Air Force Academy graduate wrote in one post.

In response to the AP's findings, a spokesman for the Department of Defense, Maj. Charlie Dietz, said the service academies make it a policy to offer equal opportunities regardless of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, gender identity or sexual orientation. He said the DOD formed a special team in April to advance progress on diversity, equity and inclusion across the entire department, including the academies.

West Point did not respond to repeated requests for comment, beyond reiterating the importance of diversity to its admissions process and to preparing cadets for leadership.

Following the murder of George Floyd in 2020, which sparked protests around the globe, a group of prominent West Point alums had released a 40-page letter urging the academy to address “major failures”

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in combatting intolerance and racism. "Though we are deeply disturbed, we hold fast to the hope that our Alma Mater will take the necessary steps to champion the values it espouses," the letter said.

An appendix offered anonymous testimonials gathered last year from West Point cadets about incidents they said went unaddressed by school officials. "I had a racist roommate that would call me the n-word and spit on me," one cadet wrote. "I told the 4th Regimental Tactical Officer about it, and they did nothing."

Shelley acknowledges West Point has become more racially diverse, but said the academy has significant work to do to retain and support students of color. In his class, he estimated about 35 Black students graduated — "some crazy low number," he said. "And we started with a lot more."

In a sense, the tributes to Lee that still dot the West Point campus illustrate the academy's dichotomy: Cadets studying military history are taught that Confederate soldiers were no heroes, yet the references to Lee — a West Point graduate who later became the academy's superintendent — remain.

The latest annual defense spending bill mandated that the Defense Department survey all its military properties for references or symbols that potentially commemorate the Confederacy, including at West Point, which the commission overseeing the work picked as its first site to visit earlier this year. But the deadline to act on any recommendations is still more than two years away.

The U.S. armed forces were segregated until the mid-1950s, when an influx of fighters were needed for the Korean War. Now, the collected services applaud themselves for 200 years as "the greatest military force in history," attracting men and women who represent all creeds, religions, races, ethnicities and sexual orientations.

At the academies, integration happened much earlier, following the abolition of slavery. During Black History Month at West Point, honor is paid to Henry O. Flipper, a formerly enslaved man who became the academy's first Black graduate in 1877. But the West Point that Flipper attended was rife with prejudice: His white classmates and professors refused to acknowledge his presence.

Today, the academies are a growing pathway to officer status for Black cadets, 2019 data from the Under Secretary of Defense shows, with about 13% of Black active-duty officers commissioned through the five institutions, compared to 19% of white active-duty officers.

Most students who enroll — about 60-70% — are nominated by U.S. senators or representatives from their home states as part of a system created in the 1840s to build a politically and geographically diverse officer corps. But today, the changed demographics of the U.S. mean the system gives disproportionate influence to rural congressional districts that tend to be whiter, the AP found.

Only 6% of nominations to the Army, Air Force and Naval academies made by the current members of Congress went to Black candidates, even though 15% of the population aged 18 to 24 is Black, according to a report on the service academies released in March by the Connecticut Veterans' Legal Center. Eight percent of congressional nominations went to Hispanic students, though they make up 22% of young adults, the report said.

The diversity of nominations has improved slightly in the past 25 years, but the report noted that 49 Congress members did not nominate a single Black student during their time in office and 31 nominated no Hispanic candidates.

In Texas, nominations to the service academics from senators Ted Cruz and John Cornyn included 23% and 20% people of color, respectively -- among the lowest levels in the Senate compared to the demographics of their state, where more than 60% of young adults are Black, Asian American, Hispanic or Latino.

Cruz's press secretary, Dave Vasquez, said the senator rejects that race should be factored in when selecting academy nominees and that names, race and other personal information are all removed before an external review board considers applications to Cruz's office, selecting candidates "on objective merits such as SAT/ACT scores, GPA, and community-service involvement." Cornyn's office did not respond to a request for comment.

Curtis Harris said he was awarded one of just three nominations to West Point out of more than 300 applications to his congressman. He graduated in 1978 and became the first in his family to rise to the officer ranks, initially becoming a platoon leader overseeing 35 people and equipment worth millions of

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dollars at the age of just 21. His uncles had enlisted in the Army and his stepfather was a Navy cook, but they had few options for advancement as Black servicemen, he said.

West Point remains a point of pride for Harris: He hasn't missed an Army-Navy football game in 40 years, and he helps review applications for nominations for U.S. Rep. Adriano Espaillat of New York. He also visits high schools and junior high schools to encourage candidates of diverse backgrounds to apply.

In a society where opportunity is not given out equally, Harris said, the academy provides the "ammunition" to be successful. Yet diversifying West Point is "not going to happen by itself," he said. "I just think that particularly people of color should know that this opportunity exists."

The Naval, Air Force, Merchant Marine and Coast Guard academies have generally become more diverse over the past two decades, according to data supplied by the four schools after the AP asked for 20 years of student body demographic data. West Point did not provide historical records, but Col. Deborah McDonald, the academy's admissions director, said it is welcoming more and more diverse students, with 37% of the class of 2024 identifying as nonwhite. A decade ago, that proportion was more like 25%, she said.

Non-white racial groups did not see appreciable changes at some academies. For instance, while the number of Hispanic cadets increased in the past two decades at the Coast Guard and Naval academies, Black cadets showed no noticeable increase during that time. In the class of 2000, there were 73 Black midshipmen in the Naval Academy -- and just 77 in 2020. At the Coast Guard Academy, there were 15 Black cadets in the 2001 class. And in 2021? Merely 16.

According to the data provided to the AP, graduation rates between racial groups at the Naval and Coast Guard academies continued to show gaps. At the Naval Academy, for example, Black midshipmen still had the lowest graduation rate of any racial group at 74%, compared to the 2020 school-wide rate of 87%. And the Black graduation rate of 65% at the Coast Guard Academy between 2011 and 2020 lagged about 20 percentage points behind other racial groups.

Only data from the Navy and Coast Guard was complete and detailed enough to look at graduate rate trends by race.

Two of the five academies -- West Point and the Air Force Academy -- now have their first Black leaders. But Easterling, the West Point graduate, noted that the faculty there remains mostly white, meaning that students who "don't see themselves, and don't want to stay" can find it hard to ask for help.

Greg Elliott said he often found himself in trouble as a midshipman at the Merchant Marine Academy and was asked to leave without graduating. He doesn't blame the academy for his mistakes and he said he never faced overt racism, but he wonders if a more diverse faculty and student body could have changed his course by making him feel he belonged.

He remembers a fellow Black alum telling him to just plow through with his head down and realize the academy was "a terrible place to be at, but it's a great place to be from."

Both Easterling and Shelley said they also saw signs of extremism during their time in the Army -- for Easterling, it was a member of his unit wearing a symbol for the Three Percenters, an anti-government paramilitary group. Both said the academies -- and the military -- need stronger guidelines for recognizing and confronting language and symbols that suggest an extremist path.

Kyle Bibby, a Naval Academy graduate who served for six years in the Marine Corps as an infantry officer, said those who characterize white supremacy only as extreme behavior miss the insidious damage that casual racism and discriminatory attitudes can inflict.

"We view white supremacy as like, you know, somebody's got the cross in the truck and they're rolling to your crib to go burn it," said Bibby, who co-founded the Black Veterans Project, which advocates for racial justice in the armed services. But the cuts are much more subtle, he said.

At the Naval Academy, he said he once was told that he was "the whitest Black guy" one of his white classmates had ever met because of his skill at trivia games. Another white classmate, unaware Bibby was in earshot, remarked that he didn't care that his sister was dating a Filipino guy but would "kill" her if she dated a Black guy.

Timothy Berry, a former Army field artillery officer who graduated from West Point in 2013 and served

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as class president, said he never felt comfortable reporting racist incidents while at the academy, fearing it would draw unwanted scrutiny to him not being a "perfect cadet," however minor his shortcomings might be.

An inspector general's report last year found the Coast Guard Academy had mishandled nearly a dozen race-based harassment allegations between 2013 and 2018 and also noted that harassment was under-reported in part because of "concerns about negative consequences."

Lt. Cmdr. Kimberly Young-McLear, a Black woman who taught at the academy from 2014 to 2019, said she herself faced years of harassment and retaliation on campus, which she has detailed in congressional testimony. She said she continues to hear from cadets, faculty and staff at the academy who are afraid to speak out about their negative treatment.

"They truly are reaching out because they don't have anywhere else to turn," she said. "This isn't about cadets just whining and complaining. They're going against a very powerful institution."

Although the academies play a big role in the diversity of military leadership, some have argued that the pipeline begins even earlier, at the high school level.

The Department of Defense sponsors Junior ROTC programs at high schools around the country where students can learn the values of the armed services, run drills and wear the uniforms. According to a 2017 study sponsored by the Secretary of Defense, the programs are often located at high schools with larger-than-average populations of students of color.

Though it may not be an official recruitment program, Junior ROTC promotes the military branches as a pathway to excellence.

Cadet handbooks for the Navy, Army, Air Force and Marine Corps all stipulate non-discrimination policies with regard to race and gender, and emphasize treating everyone with dignity and respect.

But former Junior ROTC instructor Cardelle Anthony Hopkins said little was done after one of his students at Lake Brantley High School in Florida alerted him to social media posts by her fellow cadets making racist comments about Hopkins, a retired Black master sergeant. The language was crude and threatening: One comment said he needed to be "tar and feathered." "No n----- in my corps," read another.

The students also created a fake Instagram account impersonating Hopkins that included posts making fun of cadets. And ahead of Martin Luther King Jr. Day, someone posted a sign on his classroom door reading "Blood and Soil," a white supremacist slogan.

"I was so intimidated even walking to my car. I'm thinking, I'm a grown man ... I've never been this terrified," Hopkins said. "In my entire 23 years in the military, I had never been called a n----- ever. And here I am being called that by my students."

Near the end of 2019, Hopkins said he noticed a change in the types of students enrolling in the JROTC program. In one of his freshman classrooms, for instance, every white student wrote a message in support of President Donald Trump while working on an art project to decorate ceiling tiles, he said.

"I could see that these students were a different breed," he said, noting that their behavior prompted the parents of one of his Black students to remove their daughter from the program.

Hopkins said he complained about the harassment but that it wasn't until other students went directly to Lake Brantley Principal Brian Blasewitz saying they knew who was responsible that administration officials acted to track down the two main students involved.

Hopkins said the students eventually received four-day suspensions. Blasewitz told the AP that the incidents were taken seriously, but would not disclose any disciplinary measures.

Hopkins contacted the officer then heading the Air Force Junior ROTC, who he said expressed sympathy but took no other action, other than saying Hopkins could request a transfer to a new school.

"We have roughly 120,000 cadets in Air Force JROTC alone," Hopkins said. "This one colonel sitting in his office has the ability to put out a message to every last Air Force Junior ROTC school if he wants to that says 'We will not tolerate anything like this' and really get on top of this."

In an email to the AP, the current Air Force Junior ROTC director, Col. Johnny R. McGonigal, said the responsibility for addressing the incidents fell on the high school, writing that "the instructors are employ-

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ees of the school and the school district is responsible for investigating and resolving disciplinary matters such as this one.”

Feeling defeated and isolated, Hopkins said his father -- a veteran and also a former JROTC instructor -- advised him to leave, telling him “there’s no reason to put yourself through this.”

After briefly holding the same job at another school, he stepped away from JROTC altogether and abandoned a lawsuit he had filed with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. He’s joining a Tampa, Florida, high school as a teacher’s assistant -- a job that doesn’t capitalize on his more than 20 years of military experience.

Hopkins said his ordeal leaves him unsettled about the future of the JROTC and, ultimately, the U.S. military.

“It just feels like a breeding ground for hatred,” he said of JROTC. “And it’s not being checked.”

AP writers James LaPorta in Miami and Kat Stafford in Detroit and data intern Jasen Lo in Chicago contributed to this story.

Wieffering is a Roy W. Howard Investigative Fellow.

Contact AP’s global investigative team at Investigative@ap.org or <https://www.ap.org/tips/>

Few want Roe overturned, but abortion opinions vary widely

By HANNAH FINGERHUT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Arguments before the Supreme Court this week signaled that the conservative-leaning bench may dramatically limit abortion rights in the United States.

The decision whether to uphold Mississippi’s 15-week abortion ban will determine the fate of the court’s 1973 Roe v. Wade decision legalizing abortion and its 1992 ruling in Planned Parenthood v. Casey, which reaffirmed Roe.

In 2020, AP VoteCast showed 69% of voters in the presidential election said the Supreme Court should leave the Roe v. Wade decision as is; just 29% said the court should overturn the decision.

Even so, polling suggests Americans have nuanced attitudes on the circumstances under which abortion should be allowed.

While Americans likely won’t know the high court’s ruling until June, here’s where public opinion stands on abortion before the pivotal decision.

BIG PICTURE

Overall, when asking Americans whether abortion should be legal or illegal, a majority of Americans side with abortion rights. In June, a poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research showed 57% of Americans saying abortion should be legal in all cases or in most cases, while 43% said it should be illegal in all cases or most cases. Relatively few Americans think abortion should be either legal in all cases or illegal in all cases.

Most Americans have said for decades that abortion should be legal in at least some circumstances. A question asked by Gallup since the 1970s about when abortion should be legal consistently shows only about 2 in 10 Americans say abortion should be illegal in all cases.

IN WHAT CASES

The June AP-NORC poll asked Americans whether abortion should be allowable if the woman’s health or the child’s health is seriously endangered, or if the pregnancy is a result of rape or incest. Most Americans say abortions should be allowed in all of those circumstances, including majorities of conservatives. The Mississippi law makes few allowances in the case of medical emergencies or “a severe fetal abnormality.”

But support for abortion rights declines significantly for a woman who does not want to be pregnant “for any reason.” About half of Americans think abortion should be possible in that case.

A MATTER OF TIME

Precedent established by the court has given states the ability to restrict abortion rights after the point where a fetus may be viable outside of the womb, or about 23 weeks. But in Wednesday’s arguments, Chief Justice John Roberts called a 15-week ban “not a dramatic departure from viability,” saying “if it

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really is an issue about choice, why is 15 weeks not enough time?"

Similar to support for abortion rights in general, the June AP-NORC poll showed a clear majority — 61% — saying abortion in the first trimester should be legal in all or most cases; only 16% said abortion should always be illegal.

After the first trimester, though, most Americans say there should be restrictions on abortion rights. While many still leave room for abortion in some cases, especially in the second trimester, majorities say abortion in the second or third trimester should usually or always be illegal.

In the second trimester, about a third say abortion should usually — but not always — be illegal, and roughly as many say it should always be illegal. About a third say abortion should always or usually be legal.

A majority — 54% — said abortion in the third trimester should always be illegal, and another 26% said it should usually be illegal. Just 19% said abortion in the third trimester should be legal in all or most cases.

LEAVE IT TO THE STATES?

While the high court's precedent established abortion rights throughout the United States, upholding Mississippi's law would give states the power to chip away at those rights.

In arguments on Wednesday, Justice Brett Kavanaugh, who was appointed to the bench by former President Donald Trump, questioned whether the court should be involved in the abortion issue.

"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.

The June AP-NORC poll showed Americans were closely divided over whether the federal government or state governments should have the larger role in making laws related to abortion, but leaned slightly toward national governance, 52% to 45%.

POLITICAL AND GENERATIONAL DIVIDES

There are clear differences in abortion attitudes by partisanship and age. The poll finds 69% of Democrats but only 27% of Republicans say an abortion should be possible for a woman who does not want to be pregnant for any reason. Among Republicans, 43% of moderates and liberals say abortion should be allowable in that case; only 14% of conservatives do.

More than half of adults under 60 think abortion should be possible if the woman wants one for any reason, but only 37% of those 60 and older say the same.

Most Democrats — 81% — think an abortion should usually be legal during the first trimester, compared with 41% of Republicans. Among Republicans, 26% say an abortion in the first trimester should always be illegal.

Majorities of Democrats think abortion should be allowable under at least some circumstances in the second and third trimesters, even if mostly illegal, while at least half of Republicans say abortion should not be legal under any circumstances.

Majorities of Americans across age groups say abortion should generally be legal in the first trimester, but opinions diverge on the second and third trimesters. Close to half of adults 60 and older say abortion should be illegal in all cases in the second trimester, compared with about a third of adults ages 30 to 59 and about 2 in 10 of those under 30.

About two-thirds of older adults say abortion should be illegal in all cases in the third trimester, compared with about half of adults ages 30 to 59 and about 4 in 10 of those under 30.

School chief: Discipline not needed for boy before shooting

By COREY WILLIAMS and ED WHITE Associated Press

OXFORD TOWNSHIP, Mich. (AP) — A teenager accused of killing four students at a Michigan high school was called to the office before the shooting but "no discipline was warranted," the superintendent said

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Thursday in his first extended remarks since the tragedy.

Tim Throne, leader of Oxford Community Schools, said Oxford High School looks like a "war zone" and won't be ready for weeks. But he repeatedly credited students and staff for how they responded to the violence Tuesday.

"To say that I am still in shock and numb is probably an understatement. These events that have occurred will not define us," Throne, grim-faced and speaking slowly, said in a 12-minute video.

Ethan Crumbley, 15, has been charged as an adult with two dozen crimes, including murder, attempted murder and terrorism, for the shooting at the Oakland County school, roughly 30 miles (50 kilometers) north of Detroit.

"I want you to know that there's been a lot of talk about the student who was apprehended, that he was called up to the office and all that kind of stuff. No discipline was warranted," Throne said. "There are no discipline records at the high school. Yes this student did have contact with our front office, and, yes, his parents were on campus Nov. 30."

Throne said he couldn't immediately release additional details. Sheriff Mike Bouchard has said Crumbley's classroom behavior was a concern on the day of the shooting.

In his remarks, the superintendent said he was asking the sheriff's office to publicly release school video from Tuesday.

"I want you to be as proud of your sons and daughters as I am," Throne said.

Earlier Thursday, a prosecutor repeated her criticism of Crumbley's parents, saying their actions went "far beyond negligence" and that a charging decision would come by Friday.

"The parents were the only individuals in the position to know the access to weapons," Oakland County prosecutor Karen McDonald said. The gun "seems to have been just freely available to that individual."

Four students were killed and seven more people were injured. Three were in hospitals in stable condition.

The semi-automatic gun was purchased legally by Crumbley's father last week, according to investigators.

Parents in the U.S. are rarely charged in school shootings involving their children, even as most minors get guns from a parent or relative's house, according to experts.

There's no Michigan law that requires gun owners keep weapons locked away from children. McDonald, however, suggested there's more to build a case on.

"All I can say at this point is those actions on mom and dad's behalf go far beyond negligence," she told WJR-AM. "We obviously are prosecuting the shooter to the fullest extent. ... There are other individuals who should be held accountable."

Later at a news conference, McDonald said she hoped to have an announcement "in the next 24 hours." She had firmly signaled that Crumbley's parents were under scrutiny when she filed charges against their son Wednesday.

Jennifer and James Crumbley did not return a message left by The Associated Press.

The sheriff disclosed Wednesday that the parents met with school officials about their son's classroom behavior, just a few hours before the shooting.

Crumbley stayed in school Tuesday and later emerged from a bathroom with a gun, firing at students in the hallway, police said.

"Should there have been different decisions made?" McDonald said when asked about keeping the teen in school. "Probably they will come to that conclusion. ... I have not seen anything that would make me think that there's criminal culpability. It's a terrible, terrible tragedy."

William Swor, a defense lawyer who is not involved in the case, said charging the parents would require a "very fact-intensive investigation."

"What did they know and when did they know it?" Swor said. "What advance information did they have about all these things? Did they know anything about his attitude, things of that nature. You're talking about a very heavy burden to bring on the parents."

Just over half of U.S. states have child access prevention laws related to guns, but they vary widely. Gun control advocates say the laws are often not enforced and the penalties are weak.

"Our laws haven't really adapted to the reality of school shootings and the closest we have are these child access prevention laws," said Kris Brown, president of the Brady gun control advocacy group.

In 2000, a Flint-area man pleaded no contest to involuntary manslaughter and was sentenced to two years in prison. A 6-year-old boy who was living with him had found a gun in a shoebox and killed a classmate at school.

In 2020, the mother of an Indiana teen was placed on probation for failing to remove guns from her home after her mentally ill son threatened to kill students. He fired shots inside his school in 2018. No one was injured but the boy killed himself.

In Texas, the parents of a student who was accused of killing 10 people at a school in 2018 have been sued over his access to guns.

Meanwhile, dozens of schools in southeastern Michigan canceled classes Thursday due to concerns about threatening messages on social media following the Oxford shooting. Others planned to join them and close on Friday.

"We know from research and experience that learning is nearly impossible when students and staff do not feel safe," Grosse Pointe Superintendent Jon Dean told families.

Bouchard said no threats in Oakland County were found to be credible. Just to the north in Genesee County, a Flint teenager was charged with making a false threat when she recorded a video while riding a school bus and posted it online.

"If you're making threats, we're going to find you," Bouchard said. "It is ridiculous you're inflaming the fears of parents, teachers in the community in the midst of a real tragedy."

This story has been corrected to fix the spelling of the superintendent's last name.

AP reporters Kathleen Foody and Sophia Tareen in Chicago contributed to this story.

Senate passes stopgap funding bill, avoiding shutdown

By KEVIN FREKING and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate has passed a stopgap spending bill that avoids a short-term shutdown and funds the federal government through Feb. 18 after leaders defused a partisan standoff over federal vaccine mandates. The measure now goes to President Joe Biden to be signed into law.

Earlier Thursday, congressional leaders announced they had finally reached an agreement to keep the government running for 11 more weeks, generally at current spending levels, while adding \$7 billion to aid Afghanistan evacuees.

Once the House voted to approve the measure, senators soon announced an agreement that would allow them to vote on it quickly.

"I am glad that in the end, cooler heads prevailed. The government will stay open and I thank the members of this chamber for walking us back from the brink of an avoidable, needless and costly shutdown," said Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y.

The Senate approved the measure by a vote of 69-28.

The Democratic-led House passed the measure by a 221-212 vote. The Republican leadership urged members to vote no; the lone GOP vote for the bill came from Illinois Rep. Adam Kinzinger.

Lawmakers bemoaned the short-term fix and blamed the opposing party for the lack of progress on this year's spending bills. Rep. Rosa DeLauro, chair of the House Appropriations Committee, said the measure would, however, allow for negotiations on a package covering the full budget year through September.

"Make no mistake, a vote against this continuing resolution is a vote to shut government down," DeLauro said during the House debate.

Before the votes, Biden said he had spoken with Senate leaders and he played down fears of a shutdown.

"There is a plan in place unless somebody decides to be totally erratic, and I don't think that will happen," Biden said.

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Some Republicans opposed to Biden's vaccine rules wanted Congress to take a hard stand against the mandated shots for workers at larger businesses, even if that meant shutting down federal offices over the weekend by blocking a request that would expedite a final vote on the spending bill.

It was just the latest instance of the brinkmanship around government funding that has triggered several costly shutdowns and partial closures over the past two decades. The longest shutdown in history happened under President Donald Trump — 35 days stretching into January 2019, when Democrats refused to approve money for his U.S.-Mexico border wall. Both parties agree the stoppages are irresponsible, yet few deadlines pass without a late scramble to avoid them.

Sen. Mike Lee, R-Utah, said Democrats knew last month that several Republicans would use all means at their disposal to oppose legislation that funds or allows the enforcement of the employer vaccine mandate. He blamed Schumer for not negotiating and for ignoring their position.

If the choice is between "suspending nonessential functions" or standing idle while Americans lose their ability to work, "I'll stand with American workers every time," Lee said.

Lee and Sen. Roger Marshall, R-Kan., authored an amendment that prohibited federal dollars being spent to implement and enforce a series of vaccine mandates put in place by the Biden administration. The amendment went down to defeat with 48 yes votes and 50 no votes. But having the vote opened the door to taking up the full spending bill immediately.

Lee said millions were being forced to choose between an unwanted medical procedure and losing their job.

"Their jobs are being threatened by their own government," Lee said.

"Let's give employers certainty and employees peace of mind that they will still have a job this new year," Marshall urged before the vote.

Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., countered that the federal government should be using every tool to keep Americans safe and that is why the Biden administration has taken steps to urge employers to make sure their workers are fully vaccinated or test negative before they come to the workplace.

"No one wants to go to work and be worried they might come home to their family with a deadly virus," Murray said.

The White House sees the vaccinations as the quickest way to end a pandemic that has killed more than 780,000 people in the United States and is still evolving, as seen Wednesday with the country's first detected case of a troubling new variant.

Courts have knocked back against the mandates, including a ruling this week blocking enforcement of a requirement for some health care workers.

For some Republicans, the court cases and lawmakers' fears about a potentially disruptive shutdown were factors against engaging in a high-stakes shutdown.

"One of the things I'm a little concerned about is: Why would we make ourselves the object of public attention by creating the specter of a government shutdown?" said Texas Sen. John Cornyn, a GOP leader.

The administration has pursued vaccine requirements for several groups of workers, but the effort is facing legal setbacks.

A federal judge this week blocked the administration from enforcing a vaccine mandate on thousands of health care workers in 10 states. Earlier, a federal appeals court temporarily halted the OSHA requirement affecting employers with 100 or more workers.

The administration has also put in place policies requiring millions of federal employees and federal contractors, including military troops, to be fully vaccinated. Those efforts are also under challenge.

Polling from The Associated Press shows Americans are divided over Biden's effort to vaccinate workers, with Democrats overwhelmingly for it while most Republicans are against.

Some Republicans prefer an effort from Sen. Mike Braun, R-Ind., to vote to reject the administration's mandates in a congressional review action expected next week, separate from the funding fight.

Separately, some health care providers protested the stopgap spending measure. Hospitals say it does nothing to shield them from Medicare payment cuts scheduled to go into effect amid uncertainty about

the new omicron variant.

Associated Press staff writer Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar contributed to this report.

Lawyers allied with Trump ordered to pay \$175K in sanctions

By DAVID EGGERT Associated Press

LANSING, Mich. (AP) — Nine lawyers allied with former President Donald Trump were ordered Thursday to pay Detroit and Michigan a total of \$175,000 in sanctions for abusing the court system with a sham lawsuit challenging the 2020 election results.

The money, which must be paid within 30 days, will cover the legal costs of defending against the suit, which were more than \$153,000 for the city and nearly \$22,000 for the state.

U.S. District Judge Linda Parker, who agreed to impose sanctions in August in a scathing opinion, rejected most of the attorneys' objections to Detroit's proposed award, but she did reduce it by about \$29,000. Those sanctioned include Sidney Powell, L. Lin Wood and seven other lawyers who were part of the lawsuit filed on behalf of six Republican voters after Joe Biden's 154,000-vote victory over Trump.

"Plaintiffs' attorneys, many of whom seek donations from the public to fund lawsuits like this one ... have the ability to pay this sanction," Parker wrote.

She previously ordered each of the lawyers to undergo 12 hours of legal education, including six hours in election law.

Michigan's top three elected officials — Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, Attorney General Dana Nessel and Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson, all Democrats — are seeking the disbarment of four of the nine attorneys, including Powell. She is licensed in Texas. The other three are admitted to practice in Michigan.

Powell could not be reached for comment. Wood said he will appeal the order.

"I undertook no act in Michigan and I had no involvement in the Michigan lawsuit filed by Sidney Powell," he said in an email. Wood's name was on the lawsuit, but he has insisted he had no role other than to tell Powell he would be available if she needed a seasoned litigator.

Powell is best known for saying she would "release the kraken," a mythical sea creature, to destroy Biden's claim on the White House. But baseless lawsuits in Michigan and elsewhere went nowhere, and even the Trump campaign's legal team moved to distance itself from her.

"There are consequences to filing meritless lawsuits to grab media attention and mislead Americans," Benson, the state's chief election official, said in a statement. "The sanctions awarded in this case are a testament to that, even if the dollar amounts pale in comparison to the damage that's already been done to our nation's democracy."

Follow David Eggert at <https://twitter.com/DavidEggert00>

China, US tussle over Biden's 'Summit for Democracy'

By KEN MORITSUGU Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — China and the United States are tussling over President Joe Biden's upcoming democracy summit, which the ruling Communist Party sees as a challenge to its authoritarian ways.

The party maintains China has its own form of democracy and plans to issue a report titled "China: Democracy that Works" on Saturday, five days before the opening of Biden's two-day virtual meeting with about 110 other governments.

The White House pushed back Thursday against Chinese criticism of Biden's "Summit for Democracy," after a senior Chinese official said that it divides countries and points fingers at others.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said that the participants would discuss how to work together to stand up for democracy around the world.

"That's nothing we're going to apologize for," she said.

She was responding to opening remarks by Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng at an expert forum

on the topic held by the government for foreign journalists in Beijing.

"It claims it's doing this for democracy," Le said, without naming the United States. "But this is in fact the very opposite of democracy. It will do no good to global solidarity, no good to cooperation and no good to development."

Biden has made a competition between democracies and autocracies such as Russia and China a central theme of his presidency, saying democracies must prove they can deliver. Neither Russia nor China are invited to his summit.

The Communist Party has responded by saying its system serves the country's people, citing its rapid development into a middle-income country and relative success in limiting the number of deaths from COVID-19. Officials regularly highlight failings of American democracy, from gun violence to the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol after the last presidential election.

Bonnie Glaser, a China expert who is director of the Asia Program at the German Marshall Fund of the United States, said the Chinese are correct in viewing the summit as a pushback against autocracy and China's political system.

"The Chinese Communist Party likely feels threatened by the Biden democracy narrative and feels compelled to reaffirm that it puts the people first," she said in an email. "Of course, the people come after the party and the preservation of its role, but that is left unsaid."

The U.S. also angered China by including Taiwan in the summit. China claims the self-governing island as part of its territory and objects to it having any contact on its own with foreign governments.

Associated Press writer Amer Madhani in Washington, D.C. contributed.

Omicron coronavirus variant found in multiple US states

By MICHELLE L. PRICE and BOBBY CAINA CALVAN Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The omicron variant of COVID-19, which had been undetected in the U.S. before the middle of this week, had been discovered in at least five states by the end of Thursday, showing yet again how mutations of the virus can circumnavigate the globe with speed and ease.

Just a day after the first known U.S. case was found in California, tests showed the omicron variant had infected at least five people in the New York City metropolitan area, plus a man from Minnesota who had attended an anime convention in Manhattan in late November.

A Colorado woman who had recently traveled to southern Africa, a Hawaii resident with no recent travel history, and another California resident who traveled to South Africa last month also were infected by the variant, officials said.

Much remains unknown about omicron, including whether it is more contagious, as some health authorities suspect, whether it can thwart vaccines and whether it makes people as sick as the original strain.

Health officials in each state said there was no cause for undue alarm. But the spread of the cases, some involving people who hadn't been away from home recently, meant the variant was likely already circulating domestically in some parts of the U.S.

"We gotta assume there's a lot more behind that and that it has been here for a meaningful amount of time," New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio said at a news conference with Gov. Kathy Hochul.

The infected New Yorkers included a 67-year-old woman on Long Island who had recently traveled to South Africa, residents of Brooklyn and Queens and another case possibly linked to travel. At least one person had received a dose of a COVID-19 vaccine but officials did not have details about the vaccination status of the four other cases.

In Minnesota, health officials said a man who had not traveled outside the U.S. began experiencing symptoms the day after attending the Anime NYC 2021 convention in New York City. Minnesota Health Commissioner Jan Malcolm said it's likely the man contracted COVID-19 at the convention, but officials did not know for sure.

Officials in New York said they were working to trace attendees of the convention, which was held Nov.

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19-21 and drew about 50,000 people, according to event organizers. Attendees were required to wear masks and show proof of having received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine.

It was held at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center as New York City prepared to host the annual Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade and braced for throngs of tourists to return after the U.S. opened up to vaccinated international travelers.

City Health Commissioner Dave Chokshi urged people who attended the event to get tested.

"This is not just due to people who are traveling to southern Africa or to other parts of the world where omicron has already been identified," Chokshi said Thursday.

The Minnesota man began experiencing mild symptoms Nov. 22. He had been vaccinated and received a booster shot in early November, according to health officials in his home state. He sought COVID-19 testing Nov. 24, and his symptoms have subsided, officials said.

Nov. 22 was the same day the person infected in the first California case returned to the U.S. from South Africa. The California traveler, who was vaccinated, developed mild symptoms and tested positive Monday. The second person in the state didn't need medical care and was also vaccinated.

The unvaccinated adult infected with the variant in Hawaii had gotten COVID-19 a year ago. The person isn't currently hospitalized and had "mild-to-moderate" symptoms including headache, body aches and cough, Hawaii Epidemiologist Dr. Sarah Kemble said.

She wouldn't identify the patient other to say the person lives on the island of Oahu.

Omicron is classified by the World Health Organization as a "variant of concern" as scientists work to determine how it may compare with the predominant delta variant in terms of transmissibility and severity. Scientists also are studying the degree to which existing vaccines and therapies protect against omicron.

Scientists in South Africa first reported it, but the samples came from several countries in southern Africa. And health officials in the Netherlands now say it was found there prior to the South Africa detection.

As comfort over air travel returns, it's inevitable that new variants like omicron will spread from country to country and state to state, said professor Danielle Ompad, an epidemiologist at New York University's School of Global Public Health.

"We shouldn't panic, but we should be concerned," she said.

Hochul said the case involving the Minnesota visitor underlined the need for everyone who is eligible to get vaccinated against COVID-19 or receive a booster shot if they have not already.

"There is one way to address this — New Yorkers, get vaccinated, get boosted, and get ready," the Democrat said.

Contributing to this report were Associated Press writers Marina Villeneuve in Albany, New York; Doug Glass in Minneapolis; Dave Kolpack in Fargo, North Dakota; Gretchen Ehlke in Milwaukee; and Jennifer Kelleher in Honolulu.

Senate passes stopgap funding bill, avoiding shutdown

By KEVIN FREKING and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate passed a stopgap spending bill Thursday that avoids a short-term shutdown and funds the federal government through Feb. 18 after leaders defused a partisan standoff over federal vaccine mandates. The measure now goes to President Joe Biden to be signed into law.

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Once the House voted to approve the measure, senators soon announced an agreement that would allow them to vote on it quickly.

"I am glad that in the end, cooler heads prevailed. The government will stay open and I thank the members of this chamber for walking us back from the brink of an avoidable, needless and costly shutdown," said Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y.

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The Senate approved the measure by a vote of 69-28.

The Democratic-led House passed the measure by a 221-212 vote. The Republican leadership urged members to vote no; the lone GOP vote for the bill came from Illinois Rep. Adam Kinzinger.

Lawmakers bemoaned the short-term fix and blamed the opposing party for the lack of progress on this year's spending bills. Rep. Rosa DeLauro, chair of the House Appropriations Committee, said the measure would, however, allow for negotiations on a package covering the full budget year through September.

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Some Republicans opposed to Biden's vaccine rules wanted Congress to take a hard stand against the mandated shots for workers at larger businesses, even if that meant shutting down federal offices over the weekend by blocking a request that would expedite a final vote on the spending bill.

It was just the latest instance of the brinkmanship around government funding that has triggered several costly shutdowns and partial closures over the past two decades. The longest shutdown in history happened under President Donald Trump — 35 days stretching into January 2019, when Democrats refused to approve money for his U.S.-Mexico border wall. Both parties agree the stoppages are irresponsible, yet few deadlines pass without a late scramble to avoid them.

Sen. Mike Lee, R-Utah, said Democrats knew last month that several Republicans would use all means at their disposal to oppose legislation that funds or allows the enforcement of the employer vaccine mandate. He blamed Schumer for not negotiating and for ignoring their position.

If the choice is between "suspending nonessential functions" or standing idle while Americans lose their ability to work, "I'll stand with American workers every time," Lee said.

Lee and Sen. Roger Marshall, R-Kan., authored an amendment that prohibited federal dollars being spent to implement and enforce a series of vaccine mandates put in place by the Biden administration. The amendment went down to defeat with 48 yes votes and 50 no votes. But having the vote opened the door to taking up the full spending bill immediately.

Lee said millions were being forced to choose between an unwanted medical procedure and losing their job.

"Their jobs are being threatened by their own government," Lee said.

"Let's give employers certainty and employees peace of mind that they will still have a job this new year," Marshall urged before the vote.

Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., countered that the federal government should be using every tool to keep Americans safe and that is why the Biden administration has taken steps to urge employers to make sure their workers are fully vaccinated or test negative before they come to the workplace.

"No one wants to go to work and be worried they might come home to their family with a deadly virus," Murray said.

The White House sees the vaccinations as the quickest way to end a pandemic that has killed more than 780,000 people in the United States and is still evolving, as seen Wednesday with the country's first detected case of a troubling new variant.

Courts have knocked back against the mandates, including a ruling this week blocking enforcement of a requirement for some health care workers.

For some Republicans, the court cases and lawmakers' fears about a potentially disruptive shutdown were factors against engaging in a high-stakes shutdown.

"One of the things I'm a little concerned about is: Why would we make ourselves the object of public attention by creating the specter of a government shutdown?" said Texas Sen. John Cornyn, a GOP leader.

The administration has pursued vaccine requirements for several groups of workers, but the effort is facing legal setbacks.

A federal judge this week blocked the administration from enforcing a vaccine mandate on thousands of health care workers in 10 states. Earlier, a federal appeals court temporarily halted the OSHA requirement affecting employers with 100 or more workers.

The administration has also put in place policies requiring millions of federal employees and federal contractors, including military troops, to be fully vaccinated. Those efforts are also under challenge.

Polling from The Associated Press shows Americans are divided over Biden's effort to vaccinate workers, with Democrats overwhelmingly for it while most Republicans are against.

Some Republicans prefer an effort from Sen. Mike Braun, R-Ind., to vote to reject the administration's mandates in a congressional review action expected next week, separate from the funding fight.

Separately, some health care providers protested the stopgap spending measure. Hospitals say it does nothing to shield them from Medicare payment cuts scheduled to go into effect amid uncertainty about the new omicron variant.

Associated Press staff writer Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar contributed to this report.

'The fire that's here': US is still battling delta variant

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press

While all eyes are on the new and little-understood omicron variant that is popping up around the country, the delta form of the coronavirus isn't finished wreaking havoc in the U.S., swamping hospitals with record numbers of patients in the Midwest and New England.

"Omicron is a spark that's on the horizon. Delta variant is the fire that's here today," said Dr. Nirav Shah, director of the state Center for Disease Control and Prevention in Maine, where an unprecedented 334 people were in the hospital with COVID-19 as of midweek.

The U.S. recorded its first confirmed omicron infection on Wednesday, in a Californian who had been to South Africa, where the variant was first identified a week ago. Several more cases were reported Thursday — five in the New York City area and one each in Minnesota, Hawaii and Colorado — under circumstances suggesting the variant has begun spreading within the U.S.

But there is much that is unknown about omicron, including whether it is more contagious than previous versions, makes people sicker, thwarts the vaccine or more easily breaks through the immunity that people get from a bout of COVID-19. World health authorities have yet to link any deaths to omicron.

For now, the extra-contagious delta variant accounts for practically all cases in the U.S. and continues to inflict misery at a time when many hospitals are struggling with nurse shortages and a backlog of patients undergoing procedures that had been put off early in the pandemic.

The fear is that omicron will foist even more patients, and perhaps sicker ones, onto hospitals.

"For me, it's really just, I can't imagine," said Dr. Natasha Bhuyan, a family physician in Phoenix, which has also been hit hard. "Are we going to see another surge in cases that's even higher than what we're seeing now? What will that do to our health system? What will that do to our hospitals?"

Two years into the outbreak, COVID-19 has killed over 780,000 Americans, and deaths are running at about 900 per day.

COVID-19 cases and deaths in the U.S. have dropped by about half since the delta peak in August and September, but at about 86,000 new infections per day, the numbers are still high, especially heading into the holidays, when people travel and gather with family.

With the onset of cold weather sending more people indoors, hospitals are feeling the strain.

"Delta is not subsiding," said Dr. Andre Kalil, an infectious-disease physician at the University of Nebraska Medical Center. Nebraska on Tuesday reported 555 people in the hospital with COVID-19 — the highest number since last December, when the vaccine rollout was just beginning.

Vermont on Thursday recorded its highest daily number of COVID-19 cases at 604, two days after the hospital caseload hit a pandemic-high of 84. New Hampshire, once an early vaccination leader, is now second only to Michigan in the most new cases per capita over the past two weeks.

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In Minnesota, which ranks third in new cases per capita, the Pentagon sent medical teams last month to two major hospitals to relieve doctors and nurses, and another team is set to arrive Friday.

"This fourth wave, I can pretty clearly state, has hit Minnesota harder than any of the previous ones," said Dr. Timothy Johnson, president of the Minnesota chapter of the American College of Emergency Physicians.

He said hospitals are struggling because of a combination of a lack of nurses, fatigue and patients undergoing treatments that had to be postponed earlier in the crisis. "Now those chickens are coming home to roost a little bit," he said.

At Hennepin County Medical Center in Minneapolis, where one of the military teams was sent, the number of COVID-19 patients has doubled since September, although it remains below pandemic highs, spokeswoman Christine Hill said.

"And it's concerning with the holidays coming up," she said.

Military teams have also been into Michigan, where hospitals are grappling with more COVID-19 patients than at any other time during the pandemic.

Dr. Pauline Park, who takes care of critically ill patients at the University of Michigan Health in Ann Arbor, called the latest surge "heartbreaking." One patient, a woman in her 20s, died the week of Thanksgiving. Another, a mother with young children, is on a machine built to take over for her lungs.

Arizona, where students in dozens of classrooms have been forced into quarantine, reported over 3,100 new COVID-19 cases Wednesday, numbers similar to the disastrous summer of 2020. Hospital bed space has fallen to pandemic lows.

"It's just hard because it does feel like that we are actually going backwards in time, even though we have these vaccines, which are such a great weapon for us," Bhuyan said.

While about three dozen countries worldwide have reported omicron infections, including India on Thursday, the numbers are small outside of South Africa, which has confirmed more than 170 cases.

The delta variant is still causing deep turmoil in Europe, too, including Germany and Austria. South Korea is also seeing a delta-driven surge that has pushed hospitalizations and deaths to record highs.

On Thursday, Germany, where new COVID-19 infections topped 70,000 in a 24-hour period, barred the unvaccinated from nonessential stores and cultural and recreational sites. Lawmakers are expected to take up a general vaccine mandate in the coming weeks. Austria, meanwhile, extended its lockdown.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel said the measures are necessary because hospitals could become overloaded: "The situation in our country is serious."

Baldwin: 'Someone is responsible' for shooting, but 'not me'

By ANDREW DALTON AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Alec Baldwin said he feels incredible sadness and regret over the shooting that killed a cinematographer on a New Mexico film set, but not guilt.

"Someone is responsible for what happened, and I can't say who that is, but it's not me," Baldwin said in an ABC interview with George Stephanopoulos that aired Thursday night, the first time the actor has spoken in depth on screen about the Oct. 21 shooting on the set of the Western "Rust." "Honest to god, if I felt I was responsible, I might have killed myself."

Baldwin said it is essential for investigators to find out who put the bullet in the gun he fired, that was supposed to be empty, that killed cinematographer Halyna Hutchins and injured director Joel Souza.

"There's only one question to be resolved, and that's where did the live round come from?" Baldwin said.

Baldwin said in a clip from the interview released a day earlier that "I didn't pull the trigger. I would never point a gun at anyone and pull the trigger at them. Never."

He said it was Hutchins herself who asked him to point the gun just off camera and toward her armpit before it went off.

Baldwin said at Hutchins' direction he pulled the hammer back.

"I let go of the hammer and 'bang' the gun goes off," he said.

When Stephanopoulos told Baldwin that many say you should never point a gun directly at someone

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on a set, he responded, "unless the person is the cinematographer who was directing me where to point the gun for her camera angle."

Baldwin said it was 45 minutes to an hour before he began to understand that a live round had been in the gun, and didn't know it for sure until he was being interviewed hours later. He thought Hutchins might have been hurt by a blank at close range or had a heart attack.

"The idea that somebody put a live bullet in the gun was not even in reality."

He had one of several tearful moments when he described Hutchins, saying she was "somebody who was loved by everybody and admired by everybody who worked with her."

Baldwin said he was doing the interview to counter public misconceptions about the shooting and to make it clear that "I would go to any lengths to undo what happened."

But Baldwin said "I want to make sure that I don't come across like I'm the victim because we have two victims here."

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.

Baldwin said he met with the film's armorer Hanna Gutierrez Reed for a gun training session before the shoot, and she appeared capable and responsible.

"I assumed because she was there and she was hired that she was up to the job," he said.

Gutierrez Reed has been the subject of much of the scrutiny in the case. Her attorney has said she did not put the round in the gun, and believes she was the victim of sabotage. Authorities say they've found no evidence of that.

Baldwin, who was also a producer on the film, said there was no indication to him that crew members were unhappy with safety conditions on the set, though some resigned over the issue.

"I never heard one word about that, none," Baldwin said.

Baldwin said complaints about cost-cutting on the film have been misguided.

"Everybody who makes movies has the responsibility not to be reckless and careless with the money that you're given," he said.

Asked by Stephanopoulos whether the cost-cutting compromised safety, Baldwin said "In my opinion no."

"I personally did not observe any safety or security issues at all in the time I was there," he said.

Baldwin said he does not believe he will be criminally charged in the shooting.

"I've spoken to the sheriff's department multiple times," he said. "I don't have anything to hide."

He said the incident left him emotionally ravaged.

"I have dreams about this constantly," he said, "wake up constantly where guns are going off. These images have come into my mind and kept me awake at night and I haven't slept for weeks and I've really been struggling physically."

Asked by Stephanopoulos if his career is over, Baldwin said, "It could be."

He said his next production still wants him, "but I said to myself, 'do I want to work much more after this?'"

Follow AP Entertainment Writer on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/andyjamesdalton>

Biden helps light National Christmas Tree near White House

By ALEXANDRA JAFFE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden helped light the National Christmas Tree on Thursday while remembering those lost to the COVID-19 pandemic and crediting the American people for his optimism.

Biden also paid tribute to service members, thanking them for their sacrifices.

"We are a great nation because of you, the American people," Biden said, joined on stage by his wife, first lady Jill Biden. "You've made me so optimistic."

It was Biden's first time participating in the nearly 100-year-old tradition in the nation's capital. Vice

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President Kamala Harris and her husband, Doug Emhoff, joined the Bidens.

Singer-actor LL Cool J hosted the program, which featured performances by Billy Porter, Chris Stapleton, H.E.R., Kristin Chenoweth, Patti LaBelle and Howard University's gospel choir.

The evergreen tree on the Ellipse, just south of the White House, was lit up in red and white lights. It is surrounded by smaller trees representing every U.S. state and territory and the District of Columbia. Students from across the country made the ornaments used to decorate the trees.

The first National Christmas Tree lighting was held on Christmas Eve in 1923.

Capitol riot committee has interviewed 250 people so far

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House committee investigating the Capitol insurrection has interviewed about 250 people so far, its chairman said Thursday, a staggering pace over just five months as lawmakers work to compile the most comprehensive account yet of the violent attack and plan to hold public hearings next year.

Members and staff have conducted the interviews in private, and most witnesses have appeared voluntarily. The committee has subpoenaed more than 40 people, and lawmakers say that only two have defied outright their demands, so far. The investigation began in late July.

Rep. Bennie Thompson, D-Miss., said in an interview that the committee has deposed a wide range of people, from members of former President Donald Trump's administration and White House to election officials in crucial swing states such as Georgia, Arizona, Michigan and Pennsylvania who were pressured by the former president and his allies as he pushed false claims of election fraud.

Looking ahead to next year, Republican Rep. Liz Cheney of Wyoming, the vice chairwoman, said the committee anticipates it will hold "multiple weeks of public hearings, setting out for the American people in vivid color exactly what happened every minute of the day on January 6th, here at the Capitol and at the White House, and what led to that violent attack."

Lawmakers are moving to finish before the 2022 elections, viewing their work as a crucial corrective to the growing tendency among Republicans and others to play down the siege by Trump's supporters. The violent mob echoed Trump's false claims that he won the election, beating police as they broke in and sending lawmakers running for their lives when they interrupted the certification of Joe Biden's victory.

The seven Democrats and two Republicans on the committee argue that no less than democracy is at stake as Trump considers a second run for office and as many Americans still believe his false claims of widespread fraud in the election, even though they have been rejected by courts and election officials across the country.

"History is watching," Cheney told her fellow lawmakers at a hearing Tuesday as she discussed the committee's plans.

California Rep. Adam Schiff, another member of the panel, said that "exposing all the malefactors and bloodshed that went on here is really important," especially as some people still believe Trump's baseless claims.

The hearings, Schiff said, will "tell the whole story of security at the Capitol, the intelligence leading up to the attacks — or lack of intelligence — the role of social media, the former president's role, the role of those around him and tell it in a narrative fashion so the public follows exactly what's going on."

Thompson and Cheney disclosed the number of private interviews and the plan for hearings next year at a House hearing on contempt charges against Jeffrey Clark, a former Department of Justice official who championed Trump's efforts to reverse the results of the 2020 election.

The Jan. 6 committee voted to recommend charges against Clark on Wednesday but has scheduled a second deposition with Clark for Saturday. The lawmakers say they will determine afterward whether to move ahead with the contempt charges.

The lawmakers presented their case on Clark in anticipation of a floor vote on contempt if he does not answer questions Saturday. Clark appeared for a deposition last month but refused to be interviewed, citing Trump's legal efforts to block the committee's investigation.

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Clark's lawyer now says he wants to invoke his Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination. Thompson said the lawyer had offered "no specific basis for that assertion." Thompson said he viewed it as a "last-ditch attempt to delay the Select Committee's proceedings" but said members would hear him out. The committee wants Clark to plead the Fifth Amendment on a question-by-question basis, unlike his first deposition when he and his lawyer abruptly left.

If the committee decides after the deposition that Clark is still in defiance of the subpoena, the House could vote on contempt charges as soon as next week. The Justice Department would then decide whether to prosecute.

The department has made clear it is willing to pursue the committee's contempt charges, indicting long-time Trump ally Steve Bannon last month on two counts of criminal contempt.

According to an October report 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. Trump did not do so after several aides threatened to resign.

The Senate report said Clark personally met with Trump and unsuccessfully pushed his then-supervisors, acting Attorney General Jeffrey Rosen and his deputy, Richard Donoghue, to publicly announce that the department was investigating election fraud and direct certain state legislatures to appoint new electors. Rosen and Donoghue have also been interviewed by the Jan. 6 committee.

Trump, who told his supporters to "fight like hell" on the morning of the riot, 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.

In a transcript released this week of Clark's aborted Nov. 5 interview, committee members and staff tried to persuade Clark to answer questions. But Clark's lawyer, 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.

Maryland Rep. Jamie Raskin, who sits on the committee, said the panel will assess whether Clark's answers on Saturday meet their standards of compliance.

"If he thinks that he's just going to be able to wave a magic wand with the Fifth Amendment the way he tried to wave a magic wand before with executive privilege, it's not going to work," Raskin said.

Associated Press writer Eric Tucker contributed to this report.

Women's tennis' China stance could be unique, cost millions

By STEPHEN WADE and HOWARD FENDRICH AP Sports Writers

WTA President and CEO Steve Simon did not set out to lead the way for how sports should confront China when he announced that the women's tennis tour would suspend tournaments there because of concerns about former Grand Slam doubles champion Peng Shuai's well-being.

And based on initial reactions Thursday to the WTA's groundbreaking stance, including from the International Olympic Committee — which is set to open the Beijing Winter Games in two months — along with the men's tennis tour and International Tennis Federation, no one seems too eager to follow suit with the sorts of actions that would come with a real financial hit.

"I'm not looking to send a message to any other sport bodies or influence their decisions or evaluate their decisions. This is a WTA decision that affected the WTA athlete and our core principles," Simon said in a video call with The Associated Press on Wednesday. "And I think it goes beyond that, into obviously something very, very sensitive on a worldwide basis for women, in general. So as the leading women's sports organization, and having a direct effect on this, we're focused on that.

"Now I will encourage everybody that has supported us to date — and those that haven't — to con-

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tinue speaking out and talk about this very important topic. But as far as what they need to do for their business interests and for their reasons, they need to make their own decisions. And I'm not looking to influence that."

The WTA is the first sports body to publicly and directly challenge China's authoritarian government, which is a source of billions in income across sports based elsewhere, such as the Olympics, tennis, the NBA and golf.

Audrye Wong, a political scientist who researches Chinese politics at the University of Southern California, is skeptical that Simon's group will have company.

"This is a brave and commendable move by the WTA, but I doubt that many other sports bodies or businesses will follow in the WTA's footsteps," Wong wrote in an email to the AP.

One indication came from the world of tennis in statements issued Thursday by the ITF, which oversees the Grand Slam tournaments and other events globally, and the CEO of the men's ATP Tour: Neither made any mention of China or the WTA suspension.

Wong said Chinese citizens might be asked to boycott foreign products connected to tennis — and it's possible the WTA's move could lead to more political repression.

"Unfortunately, foreign pressure will also heighten CCP (Chinese Communist Party) fears that social movements such as #MeToo pose a threat to regime stability and have to be cracked down on more harshly," she wrote.

The 35-year-old Peng, a three-time Olympian and former No. 1-ranked doubles player, dropped out of public view after making sexual assault allegations a month ago against Zhang Gaoli, who retired in 2018 from the Politburo Standing Committee, the apex of political power in China.

Her accusations, posted on social media, were scrubbed from China's tightly censored internet within a half-hour. Peng then dropped from public view. The first #MeToo case to reach the political realm in China has not been reported by the domestic media; online discussion of it has been highly censored.

Indeed, it appears few in the country even know about Peng's allegations or the fallout — or why they might see less tennis there next season.

Simon — who noted that he had the full backing of the WTA Board of Directors, players, tournaments and sponsors — said the tour would not hold events in China until the government there agrees to conduct a full investigation of Peng's allegations and offers the WTA a chance for direct communication with her. He said that could extend beyond 2022.

There are about 10 WTA tournaments annually in China, including the season-ending Tour Finals, which are scheduled to be held there for a decade.

"I don't know how to give you a number of what the actual effect will be, but it will be millions of dollars, for sure. And, you know, time will tell, based upon what comes our way, how deep and how much further that goes. I'll just say that it's significant, for sure. It's going to be significant," Simon told the AP. "And it's something that we're going to have to manage and work our way through. But I'm confident we'll find a way to manage and work our way through it."

There was barely a reaction from China's government Thursday to the WTA's move. Asked about the tournament suspension and Peng's safety, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin refused to address either.

"We are always firmly opposed to acts that politicize sports," Wang told journalists at a daily briefing.

The IOC said Thursday it held a second call with Peng; there also was one on Nov. 21. In both instances, the IOC did not release any audio, video or a transcript, explain how the contact was arranged, nor say if there was any discussion of Peng's sexual assault allegations.

The IOC said it would "stay in regular touch with her, and have already agreed on a personal meeting in January," shortly before the lucrative Beijing Games are scheduled to start on Feb. 4.

After the initial IOC call with Peng, Mary Gallagher, a China expert at the University of Michigan, said: "The IOC response is unpersuasive to everyone except to the Chinese government, which is the entity that it most needs to please."

Diana Fu, who teaches at the University of Toronto and researches China state control, said any communication Peng has had so far likely was scripted. She said the messaging was aimed outside China; if Peng's case were widely known about inside the country, according to Fu, it could serve as a catalyst for the #MeToo movement.

"A sex scandal, in itself, is not crippling for the Party," Fu said. "But viral online discussion of it, with the possibility of re-igniting a fledgling #MeToo movement in China, is feared by Beijing.

"Given that Beijing recently brought the NBA to its knees over the Houston Rockets general manager's support of Hong Kong, it will likely be very hard for the WTA to corner China," Fu added. "By standing with Peng Shuai, the WTA is riding the tiger. Once on the tiger's back, it will be hard to dismount without suffering consequences."

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

Preview of 'a post-Roe world' in Texas over abortion access

By PAUL J. WEBER and MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — Texas offers a glimpse in real time of what would be a striking new national landscape if the Supreme Court drastically curtails abortion rights: GOP-led states allowing almost no access to abortion, and women traveling hundreds of miles to end their pregnancies.

No longer a distant prospect, both sides of the ever-contentious abortion debate are actively preparing for life after Roe v. Wade.

What will happen if the Supreme Court uses its pending case from Mississippi to undo a nationwide right to an abortion that has been in place since 1973? Texas has been there for three months.

On Sept. 1, a state law took effect banning abortion at roughly six weeks, before some women even know they are pregnant. And so far, the Supreme Court has declined to block it — showing no urgency as it allows the nation's most restrictive abortion law in more than 50 years to stay on the books.

"What we've experienced the past three months in Texas is a preview of a post-Roe world," said John Seago, legislative director of Texas Right to Life, the state's largest anti-abortion group.

"You will have conservative states that take very bold pro-life laws to protect pregnant women and innocent children from abortion. And then you have states that become destination states where people are traveling."

For Texas women, those destinations since September have included not only neighboring Oklahoma and Louisiana — states where GOP lawmakers could also move to further restrict abortion depending on the forthcoming opinion by the Supreme Court — but as far as away as the West and East coasts, according to abortion providers and their allies. Some Texas providers say patient volume at their clinics has plummeted to just a third of the usual levels.

During nearly two hours of arguments Wednesday, all six conservative Supreme Court justices indicated they would uphold Mississippi's law that bans abortion after 15 weeks. It will be months before a decision is issued. Several indicated Roe itself is in jeopardy.

Amy Hagstrom Miller, president of Whole Woman's Health that operates four clinics in Texas, heard few signs of encouragement while listening to the justices. She said she has already been doing "post-Roe planning" for several years, including maps in her office that show what travel will look like for women in states with Texas-style restrictions.

For now, her Texas clinics are seeing only 20-30% of the number of patients they served this time a year ago. Her Dallas clinic is less busy because it is closer to neighboring states with less restrictive abortion laws. Farther south, at her clinic along the U.S.-Mexico border, patients are "desperately trying to get in as fast as they can," including some who do not yet know they are pregnant.

Others who arrive are told they are too far along to end their pregnancies under the Texas law.

"We're still seeing them kind of frozen and shocked in a way, and not necessarily kicking right into an action plan about what's next," Hagstrom Miller said. "That sort of surprised some of us. You know, we

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thought maybe we would be put in the position of making a referral and trying to facilitate what's next for them. But I think folks are just stunned."

Complicating matters for Texas providers is another new restriction that took effect Thursday, which makes it a crime to send abortion-inducing medication through the mail and bans it after seven weeks of pregnancy. Hagstrom Miller said 65% of her patients choose medication abortions, which have increased in popularity since regulators started allowing them two decades ago.

The Biden administration and Texas providers sued over Texas' near-ban on abortion, but the Supreme Court's pace on that has surprised both sides.

The court raised expectations it would move very quickly when it agreed to hear the cases on an expedited schedule that has been reserved for some of the most consequential cases in its history. Those include Bush v. Gore after the 2000 election, the Pentagon Papers and the Watergate tapes, which all were heard and decided within days or weeks, not months.

As far as the Texas law goes, the way it is written has so far made it unusually difficult to challenge in courts. The question the justices are considering is whether the Justice Department and abortion providers can even challenge the law in federal court.

It's impossible to say where things stand inside the Supreme Court, where the justices typically exchange and revise opinions privately on both sides before handing down a decision.

With no action so far, it seems clear that the court lacks five votes, a majority of the nine-member body, to put the Texas law on hold.

When abortion providers asked the court to keep the law from taking effect, the justices refused by a 5-4 vote, with Chief Justice John Roberts joining his three liberal colleagues in dissent.

Dr. Bhavik Kumar, a staff physician at Planned Parenthood in Houston, estimated that the number of patients it has served since the Texas law took effect has been cut by 30-50%.

Clinics in neighboring states, he said, are experiencing scheduling backlogs of patients coming from Texas. And that doesn't account for pregnant women who are simply too poor to afford a trip to another state.

"Thinking about the states where they may travel to, we know that they simply cannot absorb the volume of patients that need care," he said. "It's very scary to think about how we will provide care."

Sherman reported from Washington.

Manfred, Clark divergent views point to lengthy lockout

By STEPHEN HAWKINS and RONALD BLUM AP Baseball Writer

ARLINGTON, Texas (AP) — Hours into Major League Baseball's first work stoppage in 26 years, Commissioner Rob Manfred and union head Tony Clark presented diametrically opposed views of each side's negotiating positions that point to a lengthy lockout.

In separate news conferences less than a day into baseball's ninth work stoppage, Manfred said the union's proposal for greater free agency and wider salary arbitration would damage small-market teams.

Clark, the first former player to head the union, accused Manfred of "misrepresentations" in his letter to fans explaining the lockout, and said "it would have been beneficial to the process to have spent as much time negotiating in the room as it appeared it was spent on the letter."

"It's unnecessary to continue the dialogue," Clark said of the lockout. "At the first instance in some time of a bumpy water, the recourse was a strategic decision to lock players out."

The dispute threatens the start of spring training on Feb. 16 and opening day on March 31.

In many ways, after 26 1/2 years of labor peace the sides have reverted to the bitter squabbling that marked eight work stoppages from 1972-95, including a 7 1/2-month strike that wiped out the 1994 World Series.

Owners locked out players at 12:01 a.m. Thursday following the expiration of the sport's five-year collective bargaining agreement.

"If you play without an agreement, you are vulnerable to a strike at any point in time," Manfred said.

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"What happened in 1994 is the MLBPA picked August, when we were most vulnerable because of the proximity of the large revenue dollars associated with the postseason. We wanted to take that option away and try to force the parties to deal with the issues and get an agreement now."

Players gained salary arbitration in 1974 and free agency two years later, and most of the previous disputes centered on the rise of big salaries caused by both, along with demands, mostly by small- and middle-market owners, to control costs and increase their competitive ability.

Management gained an ever-increasing series of restraints over the last two decades, such as a luxury tax on high payrolls, leading to a decrease in average salary during the latter years of the most recent labor deal.

Now players want more liberalized free agency and arbitration, leading to a confrontation.

"It's a whole list of topics that they've told us they will not negotiate," said Bruce Meyer, the players' chief lawyer. "They will not agree, for example, to expand salary arb eligibility. They will not agree to any path for any player to achieve free agency earlier. They will not agree to anything that would allow players to have additional ways to get service time to combat service-time manipulation. They told us on all of those things they will not agree."

Since 1976, players can become free agents after six seasons of major league service. The players' association proposed starting with the 2023-24 offseason that it changes to six years or five years and age 30.5, with the age in the second option dropping to 29.5 starting in 2025-26.

Players want arbitration eligibility to decrease to two years of service, its level until the mid-1980s.

Central to the strife is the union's anger over a larger number of teams in recent seasons jettisoning veterans in favor of rebuilding while accumulating prospects. Teams sometimes conclude rebuilding — the players call it tanking — is a preferred strategy for long-term success, even though it can rankle their fans.

"We feel our proposals would positively affect competitive balance, competitive integrity," Meyer said. "We've all seen in recent years the problem with teams that don't seem to be trying their hardest to win games or put the best teams on the field."

In the signing scramble ahead of the lockout, teams committed \$1 billion to contracts on Wednesday, including six nine-figure agreements that raised the total to nine in the last month and total spending to \$2.5 billion since Oct. 1.

"The fact that this year there seems to be more activity sooner by clubs in free agency than a normal year raises more questions than it answers about all the other years," Meyer said. "One good week of free agency doesn't address all the negative trends that we've seen."

MLB would keep existing free-agency provision or change eligibility to age 29.5.

"We already have teams in smaller markets that struggle to compete," Manfred said. "Shortening the period of time that they control players makes it even harder for them to compete. It's also bad for fans in those markets. The most negative reaction we have is when a player leaves via free agency. We don't see that, making it earlier, available earlier, we don't see that as a positive."

Clark spoke at the hotel where negotiations broke off and Manfred about 14 miles away at Globe Life Field, home of the Texas Rangers.

"The players' association, as is their right, made an aggressive set of proposals in May, and they have refused to budge from the core of those proposals," Manfred said. "Things like a shortened reserve period, a \$100 million reduction in revenue sharing and salary arbitration for the whole two-year class are bad for the sport, bad for the fans and bad for competitive balance."

An agreement by early-to-mid-March is needed for a full season.

"Speculating about drop dead deadlines at this point, not productive," Manfred said. "So I'm not going to do it."

Negotiations have made little to no progress since they began last spring. Manfred said a lockout was management's only tool to speed the process.

"People need pressure sometimes to get to an agreement," Manfred said. "Candidly, we didn't feel that sense of pressure from the other side during the course of this week."

—

Hawkins reported from Arlington, Texas, and Blum from New York

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

Roe v. Wade nearly fell 30 years ago. Can it survive again?

By MARK SHERMAN and JESSICA GRESKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — We've been here before, with the fate of abortion rights throughout the United States in doubt and awaiting a decision by the Supreme Court.

Nearly 30 years ago, the court came within a vote of throwing out the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision that legalized abortion throughout the United States and returning the ability to restrict if not ban abortion to the states.

It might happen this time, after arguments Wednesday during which conservative justices suggested support for overruling Roe. The landmark decision could also emerge significantly diminished but not dead when the court decides what to do with Mississippi's 15-week ban on abortions, probably in late June.

Under Chief Justice John Roberts the court has issued several rulings over the years that resolved important cases in surprising ways. Roberts' handiwork produced the opinion that saved the Affordable Care Act in 2012 by a single vote.

But the conservatives' searing defeat in 1992, when the court unexpectedly reaffirmed Roe in its decision in Planned Parenthood v. Casey, has in some ways helped produce a court that appears less likely to settle on some middle ground on abortion.

"Casey strengthened the anti-abortion movement's and conservatives' desire to make sure there would be no more justices who looked like they would be conservative but who did not vote conservatively," said Suzanna Sherry, a professor at Vanderbilt University's law school.

The court has changed even during Roberts' tenure, as a result of three appointees of former President Donald Trump who were vetted by an active and exacting conservative legal movement.

Justices Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh and Amy Coney Barrett had long conservative records as judges — or in Barrett's case, as an academic before becoming a judge. Both Gorsuch and Kavanaugh worked in the administration of George W. Bush.

And it's not just abortion. The justices seem likely to expand gun rights and religious freedom before the term ends, and the future of affirmative action in college admissions also is teed up for the court's consideration sometime in the next year.

The Roe and Casey courts had justices that are "night and day away from the judicial philosophies and approaches of the current court," said Notre Dame law professor Sherif Girgis.

New York University law professor Melissa Murray said the new justices embrace "a kind of a conservatism that does not brook compromise. It's unyielding in its purity."

With a 6-3 conservative majority, the court has taken on cases, including the current controversies over abortion and guns, that it passed over before all three Trump appointees came on board.

Until 2018, there were five justices who voted consistently to protect abortion rights — four liberals and Justice Anthony Kennedy, the court's swing vote.

Even when Kennedy retired and was replaced by Kavanaugh, there remained four liberal votes and Roberts, with concerns about the perception of his court as a political institution, seemed disinclined to take big steps on abortion. Indeed, he wrote the controlling opinion last year that struck down a Louisiana law regulating abortion clinics.

Then Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg died in September 2020 and was replaced by Barrett just days before Trump lost his reelection bid.

If Roberts is intent on finding a way out of the Mississippi case without explicitly overruling Roe and Casey, he probably will need support from at least one of the Trump appointees.

But Girgis said it was particularly notable during Wednesday's argument that "no one seemed interested in the chief justice's middle ground."

Murray agreed that Roberts appeared "all alone" Wednesday, unlikely to be able to leverage interest in concern about the court as an institution to broker some sort of compromise.

On the other hand, Sherry thought she heard the makings of a decision that would leave Roe standing but remove viability, at roughly 24 weeks of pregnancy, as the point before which states cannot ban abortion.

Such an outcome still would be a sweeping change in abortion law, Murray said, although she acknowledged it would "in some quarters be hailed as a compromise, if not a victory."

Supreme Court arguments can offer a preview of what the justices are thinking, but they don't always telegraph the final result. Behind the scenes the justices can spend months crafting opinions. Occasionally, as the writing progresses, votes can change.

It happened in 1992, when Kennedy joined with Justices Sandra Day O'Connor and David Souter to form a surprising Republican-appointed trio that produced the heart of the court's opinion that reaffirmed the right to an abortion, even as it allowed states more leeway in regulating them.

But just because it happened before doesn't mean it will happen this time.

"It's too quick to infer from the way these cases have gone before that this one will go the same way," Girgis said.

Democrats hope threat to abortion rights will rouse voters

By STEVE PEOPLES AP National Politics Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Vulnerable Democrats from Nevada to New Hampshire are promising to make abortion a centerpiece of their political strategy heading into the midterm elections, betting that an intense focus on the divisive issue can rally their voters to beat back a red wave and preserve their narrow majorities in Congress.

Strategists in both parties suggest it may not be so easy.

Democrats have been sounding the alarm on abortion rights in nearly every election cycle this century, including last month's stunning defeat in the Virginia governor's race. In most cases, it's Republicans who have shown to be more motivated by the issue.

Still, as the Supreme Court's conservative majority signals a willingness to weaken or reverse the landmark Roe v. Wade precedent, Democrats insist they can convince voters that the threat to women's health is real and present in a way it wasn't before.

"This isn't crying wolf. This is actually happening," Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto, who is facing a difficult reelection test in Nevada, said in an Associated Press interview. She took to the Senate floor Wednesday and warned, "The reproductive freedom of women everywhere is in jeopardy," before casting her Republican opponents as "anti-abortion extremists" in the interview.

The new intensity is prompted by the high court's deliberation over a Mississippi law presenting the most serious challenge to abortion rights in decades. In nearly two hours of arguments Wednesday, the Supreme Court's conservative majority suggested they may uphold a Mississippi law banning all abortions after 15 weeks of pregnancy and possibly allow states to ban abortion much earlier in pregnancy. Current law allows states to regulate but not ban abortion up until the point of fetal viability, at roughly 24 weeks.

The court's final ruling is expected in June, just ahead of midterm elections that will decide the balance of power in Congress and in statehouses across the country.

Already braced for a rough year, Democrats have been searching for an issue that can both energize a base deflated by slow progress on various issues in Washington and repair the party's strained relationship with suburban voters, who may be drifting back toward the GOP in the months since former President Donald Trump left office.

Abortion rights could be it, but it's not necessarily a silver bullet, said Democratic pollster Molly Murphy, who recently surveyed voters across several battleground states on the issue.

"It's the question I ask myself," she said.

Democrats likely will not win on abortion if they simply recycle the arguments that Republicans are trying to roll back abortion rights, Murphy said. To be successful, they must argue that Republicans are spending

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their time and energy attacking women's reproductive rights at the expense of issues like the economy, the pandemic and health care. She also encouraged Democrats to focus on Republican-backed measures, like one in effect in Texas, that would penalize health care professionals and the women involved in some abortion cases.

Murphy's guidance acknowledged the nuances of public opinion on abortion rights.

A June AP-NORC poll showed 57% of Americans said that in general abortion should be legal in all or most cases. But the same poll showed many Americans question whether a woman should be able to get a legal abortion "for any reason," and most said abortion after the first trimester should be restricted.

In the second trimester, about a third said abortion should usually — but not always — be illegal, while roughly as many said it should always be illegal. And a majority — 54% — said abortion in the third trimester should always be illegal.

Privately, some Republicans concede that a wave of dramatic new state restrictions on abortion that could follow the court's ruling could change the conversation and disrupt their momentum heading into 2022. Twelve states have "trigger laws" that would immediately ban all or nearly all abortions if Roe is overturned, and other GOP-led states would likely move quickly as well. But Republicans also express confidence in their ability to focus on other issues.

That was the case last month in Virginia's race for governor, where Democrats and their allies invested heavily in trying to tie GOP candidate Glenn Youngkin to a new Republican-backed Texas law that bans most abortions. Democrat Terry McAuliffe's closing message centered on both former President Donald Trump and abortion.

And while Youngkin's campaign privately worried that the abortion focus might hurt him, particularly among suburban women, Youngkin prevailed in part by shifting the conversation toward parents' frustration with local education.

"I didn't see abortion as a big issue," said Linda Brooks, who chairs the Virginia Democratic Party's women's caucus, pointing instead to schools and Trump as the biggest factors in her state's recent elections. "It's just not on people's' minds."

Only 6% of Virginia voters called abortion the most important issue facing the state, according to AP VoteCast, a survey of the electorate.

In fact, the issue seems more relevant for Republicans. In last year's presidential election, VoteCast found that the 3% of voters who said abortion was the most important issue facing the country voted for Trump over Democrat Joe Biden, 89% to 9%.

A significant portion of the electorate simply doesn't believe that the court will overturn Roe, acknowledged Jenny Lawson, the Planned Parenthood Action Fund's vice president of organizing and engagement campaigns. But Lawson said she thinks that could change quickly.

"The court is doing that work for us," Lawson said. "The world has changed. What happened yesterday was earth shaking."

David Bergstein, a spokesman for the Senate Democrats' campaign arm, vowed that the party would put "the threat that Republicans pose to women's health care front and center in Senate campaigns." And vulnerable Senate Democrats in Arizona, Georgia, Nevada and New Hampshire leaned into the issue Wednesday and Thursday.

Sen. Maggie Hassan, another vulnerable Democrat on the ballot in 2022, joined a handful of New Hampshire voters protesting Wednesday outside the Supreme Court. In a subsequent interview, she warned that the court was "on the verge of gutting Roe v. Wade."

"If the Supreme Court won't protect a woman's fundamental decision-making rights, and won't respect a woman's role as a full and equal citizen in a democracy, it leaves people at the mercy of a state legislature like the one we're seeing in New Hampshire," Hassan said.

New Hampshire, like states across the West, has a long bipartisan history of supporting abortion rights — even Republican Gov. Chris Sununu describes himself as pro-choice — but the state's Republican-led Legislature has been moving aggressively to enact restrictions in recent months.

In Nevada, a libertarian-leaning Western state, voters passed abortion rights protections in 1990, and

any changes to state law would require another ballot initiative. Former Republican Gov. Brian Sandoval supported abortion rights while in office, and in 2014 the state party removed an anti-abortion plank from its platform.

But as attorney general, current Republican Senate candidate Adam Laxalt joined GOP colleagues from other states in court briefs supporting strict abortion limits in Texas and Alabama. Last July, 12 Republican governors and more than 200 Republicans in Congress asked the Supreme Court to overturn Roe in legal briefs related to the Mississippi case.

Laxalt said he looks forward to standing "for the rights of the unborn" in the Senate.

"Catherine Cortez Masto and the Democrats are desperate to distract Nevadans from the massive job losses, sky-high inflation and open border anarchy they have presided over," Laxalt said in a statement in response to questions about the latest Supreme Court case. "Hiding behind this issue will not save them from the judgment of Nevada voters."

AP writers Holly Ramer in Concord, New Hampshire, Sam Metz in Carson City, Nevada, and Hannah Fingerhut in Washington contributed.

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

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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 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 4.08 suicides among 0- 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."

This story was first published on December 1, 2021, and The Associated Press, using data provided by Utah state health officials, erroneously compared youth suicide rates from different age groups. It was updated on December 2, 2021 to correct that Utah's 2020 per capita rate was 4.08 suicides per 100,000 among 0-17-year-olds. The 2020 per capita rate of 8.85 suicides per 100,000 in Utah was for 10-17-year-olds.

Man arrested in death of Jacqueline Avant, music icon's wife

BEVERLY HILLS, Calif. (AP) — A 29-year-old man has been arrested in the death of philanthropist Jac-

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queline Avant, who was fatally shot this week at the Beverly Hills home she shared with her husband, legendary music executive Clarence Avant, police said Thursday.

Ariel Maynor is currently on parole and was taken into custody early Wednesday by Los Angeles police at a separate residence after a burglary there, Beverly Hills Police Chief Mark Stainbrook said.

Police recovered an AR-15 rifle at that home that was believed to have been used in the shooting of Jacqueline Avant. Maynor accidentally shot himself in the foot with the gun, police said, and is being treated before he can be booked into jail.

Authorities do not believe there are any other suspects in the Avant case, and Stainbrook said there are no outstanding threats to public safety.

Police have not yet determined Maynor's motive or whether he targeted the Avant home or it was a random attack. It was not immediately known if he had an attorney.

Maynor has previous felony convictions for assault, robbery and grand theft.

Police were called to the Avants' home early Wednesday after a 2:23 a.m. call reporting a shooting. Officers found Jacqueline Avant, 81, with a gunshot wound. She was taken to the hospital but did not survive.

Clarence Avant and a security guard at their home were not hurt during the shooting.

Surveillance camera footage showed the suspect's vehicle driving east out of Beverly Hills after the shooting, police said.

An hour later, Los Angeles Police Department officers were called to a home in the Hollywood Hills — about 7 miles (11.27 kilometers) from the Avant residence — for a reported shooting. They found Maynor there, as well as evidence of a burglary at that home, and took him into custody.

At some point that night, an "astute watch commander" in the LAPD's Hollywood Division "put two and two together" and reached out to Beverly Hills investigators, according to LAPD Deputy Chief Blake Chow.

Jacqueline Avant was a longtime local philanthropist who led organizations that helped low-income neighborhoods including Watts and South Los Angeles, and was on the board of directors of the International Student Center at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Grammy-winning executive Clarence Avant is known as the "Godfather of Black Music" and was inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame earlier this year. The 90-year-old was also a concert promoter and manager who mentored and helped the careers of artists including Bill Withers, Little Willie John, L.A. Reid, Babyface, Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis.

The Avants' daughter, Nicole Avant, is a film producer and former U.S. ambassador to the Bahamas and is married to Netflix co-CEO and Chief Content Officer Ted Sarandos.

Tributes to Jacqueline Avant poured in from across the country. She was remembered by former President Bill Clinton, basketball icon Earvin "Magic" Johnson, Democratic Rep. Karen Bass of California and music star Quincy Jones.

"The heaviness of my heart today is unlike any other that I have ever experienced in my life," Jones said on Instagram. "She was the purest of souls in every sense, & was the Rock of Gibraltar for Clarence, their children, her friends, & community. We are all, every single one of us, better people because Jacquie was in our lives."

Actor and director Tyler Perry tweeted that his "heart breaks for Clarence and Nicole and all the Avant family."

Germany's Merkel at farewell ceremony: Don't tolerate hate

BERLIN (AP) — Outgoing Chancellor Angela Merkel called on Germans to stand up to hatred, at a military ceremony Thursday bidding her farewell after 16 years in office.

Merkel was honored with a traditional military musical performance and march in front of almost all the country's political elite — save for the far-right Alternative for Germany, who weren't invited.

"Our democracy also lives from the fact that wherever hatred and violence are seen as a legitimate means of pursuing one's interests, our tolerance as democrats has to find its limit," said in a speech ahead of the ceremony.

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The event, which was held at the Defense Ministry rather than in a more public setting due to pandemic constraints, involved a parade and a brass band playing three songs of Merkel's choice.

The first piece was "You Forgot the Color Film" released in 1974 by East German-born punk singer Nina Hagen. In it, the singer recounts a young woman's lament that her boyfriend failed to take color pictures of their beach holiday.

Hagen, like Merkel, grew up in East Germany, but emigrated to the West in 1976 after clashing with the communist country's authorities.

Merkel explained that the song was "a highlight of my youth, which is known to have taken place in the GDR." East Germany was officially known as the German Democratic Republic.

"By chance, (the song) is also set in a region that was in my former constituency" on the Baltic Sea, she added. "As such, it all fits together."

Her second choice was a popular chanson by German singer Hildegard Knef called "It Shall Rain Red Roses for Me." She was presented with a bouquet of the flowers.

The final piece chosen by the daughter of a Protestant pastor was an 18th century Christian hymn, "Holy God, we Praise thy Name."

Merkel remains caretaker chancellor until her successor, the Social Democrat Olaf Scholz, is sworn in next week. She wished him and his new center-left government "all the best, good luck and much success."

The long-time leader also urged her audience to "always see the world through the eyes of others too" and to work "with joy in your hearts."

Before Thursday evening's ceremony, she met other federal and state leaders to agree on new measures to curb coronavirus infections in Germany.

Conflict over abortion laws won't abate if Roe v. Wade falls

By DAVID CRARY AP National Writer

On both sides of America's abortion debate, activists are convinced that Roe v. Wade — the 1973 Supreme Court ruling establishing a nationwide right to abortion — is imperiled as never before.

Yet no matter how the current conservative-dominated court handles pending high-profile abortion cases — perhaps weakening Roe, perhaps gutting it completely — there will be no monolithic, nationwide change. Fractious state-by-state battles over abortion access will continue.

Roe's demise would likely prompt at least 20 Republican-governed states to impose sweeping bans; perhaps 15 Democratic-governed states would reaffirm support for abortion access.

More complicated would be politically divided states where fights over abortion laws could be ferocious — and likely become a volatile issue in the 2022 elections.

"Many of these states are one election away from a vastly different political landscape when it comes to abortion," said Jessica Arons, a reproductive rights lawyer with the American Civil Liberties Union.

Those states include Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin, which now have Democratic governors and Republican-controlled legislatures. GOP gubernatorial victories next year could position those states to join others in imposing bans if Roe were nullified.

The net effect on abortion prevalence is difficult to predict, given that many people in states with bans would persist in seeking to terminate unwanted pregnancies. Some could face drives of hundreds of miles to reach the nearest clinic; others might obtain abortion pills by mail to end a pregnancy on their own.

Among the briefs filed with the Supreme Court as it considers a Mississippi law banning most abortions after 15 weeks is one reflecting input from 154 economists and researchers. If abortions became illegal in 23 states, they calculate, the number of abortions at clinics nationwide would fall by about 14%, or about 120,000, in the following year.

Abortion-rights activists predict women of color, rural residents, low-income women, and LGBTQ people would be disproportionately affected.

Under this scenario, the economists say, bans would affect 26 million women of child-rearing age, and the average distance to the nearest abortion clinic would increase from 35 miles (56 kilometers) to 279

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miles (449 kilometers).

Elizabeth Nash of the Guttmacher Institute, a research organization that supports abortion rights, says a gutting of Roe would galvanize some Democratic-governed states and abortion-rights groups to accelerate programs assisting people to cross state lines for abortions.

"But things will get complicated and difficult very quickly," she said. "You're disrupting the entire abortion care network across the country, and people will be seeking abortion in locations which may not have enough capacity for people in their state already."

A possible preview is unfolding at Planned Parenthood's clinic in Fairview Heights, Illinois, just outside St. Louis. It opened in 2019 as an abortion option for people from Missouri and other nearby Republican-governed states. It's seeing an increase in patients from farther away as a tough ban in Texas creates appointment backlogs throughout the south-central U.S.

Dr. Colleen McNicholas, Planned Parenthood's chief medical officer for reproductive health services in the St. Louis region, said the clinic is bracing for a possible influx of an additional 14,000 women per year seeking abortion services if post-Roe bans proliferate.

"We're absolutely thinking about what operational changes we would need — staying open seven days a week, operating two shifts each day — to absorb that many patients," she said.

Already, patients are "super frustrated" by drives of up to nine hours from home, she said.

Michael New, an abortion opponent who teaches social research at The Catholic University of America, said possible increases of out-of-state abortions and "mail-order abortions" would be among several challenges facing the anti-abortion movement even as its dream of Roe's demise came true.

Another potential challenge: Some Democratic-leaning prosecutors might refuse to enforce bans.

Michigan, for example, has a 90-year-old ban on the books. Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel, a Democrat, says she wouldn't enforce it if it became law; a local prosecutor, Democrat Eli Savit in Washtenaw County, tweeted, "We will never, ever prosecute any person for exercising reproductive freedom."

While there's a consensus that Roe is more vulnerable than ever, there's no certainty about how the Supreme Court might proceed. Clues, however, surfaced Wednesday after justices heard arguments in *Dobbs vs. Jackson Women's Health Organization*.

In that case, Mississippi asked the court to overrule Roe and the follow-up 1992 decision that prevents states from banning abortion before viability, the point around 24 weeks of pregnancy when a fetus can survive outside the womb.

If the court simply upholds Mississippi's ban, other Republican-governed states would likely enact similar measures. The Guttmacher Institute says between 6.3% and 7.4% of U.S. abortions, or 54,000 to 63,000 annually, are obtained at or after 15 weeks of pregnancy.

However, activists on opposing sides believe the high court — either in the Mississippi case or a subsequent one — is poised to go further, nullifying Roe so states would be free to impose sweeping bans.

"For nearly 50 years, states have been prevented from passing abortion laws that reflect the values of people who live there," said Mallory Quigley of the Susan B. Anthony List, an anti-abortion group. "Dobbs is the best opportunity since 1973 to correct that."

Wisconsin could become one of the most contested battlegrounds, since it still has in its statutes an 1849 law criminalizing abortion. But even if the law took effect, it might not be enforced if next year's election leaves Democrats serving as governor, attorney general and as district attorneys in Milwaukee and Madison, which are home to abortion clinics.

The 2022 elections are likely to energize activists in each camp, says Julaine Appling, an abortion opponent who leads the Wisconsin Family Council.

"The smart candidates running on either side will say it makes a huge difference who is governor and who is attorney general," she said. "Wisconsin is very purple — and we've got a real fight on our hands on this issue."

When Roe was decided, abortion was broadly legal in four states, allowed under limited circumstances in 16 others, and outlawed under nearly all circumstances elsewhere. In 1974, a year after Roe, there were about 900,000 abortions in the U.S., according to the Guttmacher Institute.

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Abortions rose steadily, peaking at 1.61 million in 1990, before a steady decline — falling to 862,000 in Guttmacher's latest survey, covering 2017. The decline is attributed to increased availability of effective contraception and a plunge in unintended pregnancies, notably among teens.

Women also have safer, easier options for terminating pregnancies; medication abortions now account for about 40% of U.S. abortions. Advocacy groups are spreading the word about abortion pills that can be used at home without a medical professional's involvement.

Increased use of mail-order pills could pose a dilemma for the anti-abortion movement, given that its leaders generally say they don't favor criminalizing the actions of women seeking abortions. Pills often are shipped from overseas; those suppliers are an elusive target for prosecutors.

Arons, the ACLU lawyer, says anti-abortion activists are deluding themselves if they think post-Roe bans can enable them to live in abortion-free states.

"People who want to end their pregnancies will find a way to do so, whether it's legal or not," she said. "The need will always be there."

Associated Press religion coverage receives support from the Lilly Endowment through The Conversation U.S. The AP is solely responsible for this content.

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.

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."

New data suggests 1 in 44 US children affected by autism

By LINDSEY TANNER AP Medical Writer

New autism numbers released Thursday suggest more U.S. children are being diagnosed with the developmental condition and at younger ages.

In an analysis of 2018 data from nearly a dozen states, researchers at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that among 8-year-olds, 1 in 44 had been diagnosed with autism. That rate compares with 1 in 54 identified with autism in 2016.

U.S. autism numbers have been on the rise for several years, but experts believe that reflects more awareness and wider availability of services to treat the condition rather than a true increase in the number of affected children.

A separate CDC report released Thursday said that children were 50% more likely to be diagnosed with autism by age 4 in 2018 than in 2014.

"There is some progress being made and the earlier kids get identified, the earlier they can access services that they might need to improve their developmental outcome," said CDC researcher and co-author Kelly Shaw.

Geraldine Dawson, director of Duke University's Center for Autism and Brain Development, said the new estimate is similar to one found in research based on screening a large population of children rather than on those already diagnosed. As such, she said it may be closer to reflecting the true state of autism in U.S. children than earlier estimates.

The CDC reports are based on data from counties and other communities in 11 states — some with more urban neighborhoods, where autism rates tend to be higher. The rates are estimates and don't necessarily reflect the entire U.S. situation, the authors said.

Autism rates varied widely — from 1 in 26 in California, where services are plentiful, to 1 in 60 in Missouri.

Overall, autism prevalence was similar across racial and ethnic lines, but rates were higher among Black children in two sites, Maryland and Minnesota. Until recently, U.S. data showed prevalence among white children was higher.

At a third site, Utah, rates were higher among children from lower-income families than those from wealthier families, reversing a longstanding trend, said report co-author Amanda Bakian, a University of Utah researcher who oversees the CDC's autism surveillance in that state.

Bakian said that likely reflects more coverage for autism services by Medicaid and private health insurers.

Follow AP Medical Writer Lindsey Tanner at @LindseyTanner.

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.

Variants, boosters turn rich-poor vaccine gap into chasm

By LORI HINNANT and MARIA CHENG Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — The global initiative to share coronavirus vaccines fairly already scaled back its pledge to the world's poor once. Now, to meet even that limited promise, COVAX would have to deliver more than a million doses every hour until the end of the year in some of the world's most challenging places.

That seems unlikely: Gavi, the vaccine alliance that helps run COVAX, warned in internal documents that a substantial number of doses might only show up in late 2022 or even 2023 as wealthy countries drag out their donations while locking in contracts for new shots by the hundreds of millions.

Even if the U.N.-backed initiative secured the doses and overcame the logistical hurdles, the developing world would still face a gaping need. COVAX's new promise is for 1.4 billion doses, but according to the documents, mid- and low-income countries need 4.65 billion to vaccinate 70% of their populations.

And that need is only expected to increase — as many countries pursue boosters and tweaked vaccines that can tackle new variants.

At this point more than half the world's population has received at least one shot, but only 6% of the population in the poorest countries have. Meanwhile, richer countries are pushing ahead with buying up third and fourth doses for their citizens.

COVAX was formed soon after COVID-19 became a pandemic, intended to guarantee that low- and middle-income countries would quickly get vaccine doses — without having to muscle their way into competitive markets with nations that could outbid them or be at the mercy of unreliable donations. Getting vaccines to every corner of the globe is especially important because experts say that until protection is broadly spread across the world, everyone remains at risk.

But COVAX lacked cash during the crucial months that the United States, countries in Europe and other wealthy nations locked in contracts. Its first delivery came Feb. 24 — to Ghana — more than two months after injections started in Britain and the United States.

Poor countries fell further behind by the day, and COVAX was dealt a new blow in March when the Serum Institute of India, which was supposed to be its main supplier, cut off exports to boost domestic vaccine supplies amid a massive surge in coronavirus cases. Those exports are only now resuming.

In September, COVAX abandoned its initial goal to deliver 2 billion doses by the end of 2021, reducing it to 1.4 billion.

Gavi and the World Health Organization have trumpeted each donation pledge in bold headlines in news releases, while quietly burying the much smaller numbers of donated doses that are actually delivered.

"We have been vocal in calling out high income countries for hoarding vaccines and manufacturers for failing to prioritize COVAX, which represents a failure of multilateralism, not of COVAX, and I'm proud that COVAX has been able to make such a transformative impact in countries that otherwise would have been left out in the cold completely," said Aurelia Nguyen, its managing director.

But Gavi and WHO have both shied away from criticizing their biggest donor countries by name, even when they began vaccinating children or offering boosters to healthy adults — despite WHO's plea to countries to prioritize the world's poor over boosters and shots for kids at home. WHO's position on boosters could change depending on what's learned about omicron.

Despite the setbacks, in private briefings to partners ahead of a board meeting that ends Thursday, Gavi has consistently maintained that an increased vaccine supply in late 2021 would salvage their goals.

The hope was rich countries would wrap up their immunization campaigns in late 2021, and send more doses to the rest of the world.

That hasn't happened.

The push for booster shots in many wealthier countries presented the first obstacle — though it's not clear they make it impossible to keep promises. Rich countries pledged to donate 1.2 billion doses by mid-2022, and data from analytics company Airfinity from mid-October showed that those donations could go out this year and there would still be enough for boosters at home.

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Now, manufacturers are looking at creating second-generation vaccines to tackle variants. Airfinity said that would take until late next year at best for a global rollout and would mean taking current vaccine production offline.

Not only that, but emerging preferences for certain shots — with better safety and efficacy profiles or easier transport requirements — undermined COVAX's hope to use a wide pool of WHO-authorized vaccines, including those made in China, Russia and India.

As COVAX transitions from emergency mechanism into longer-term effort, some public health officials want to abandon the model altogether.

"There hasn't been any admission of how badly they miscalculated things," said Kate Elder, senior vaccines policy adviser at Doctors Without Borders.

She explained that a significant proportion of COVAX doses are now based on donations, rather than the deals with pharmaceuticals the effort was banking on last year. That's because rich countries including Britain, Canada, Germany and others signed early deals with drugmakers that reserved the vast majority of the limited COVID-19 vaccine supply, cutting out COVAX. Meanwhile, their promised donations are only trickling in.

Sajid Javid, Britain's health minister, was asked about the discrepancy between rich and poor nations when it comes to vaccines and booster shots. He told Parliament on Monday that he and his counterparts among the G-7 wealthy nations understood the need to share with poor nations and had "all agreed about the importance of this and about redoubling efforts."

Four days later, the U.K. announced it had sealed deals into 2023 to offer Britons fourth doses.

"I don't know if there's a way to make governments not hoard vaccines, so maybe we need a way to force them to donate a certain percentage instead," Elder said.

Although COVAX has now revised some of its initial practices, little has been changed about the effort's fundamental structure.

But Dr. Madhukar Pai, of McGill University's School of Population and Public Health, said the blame primarily rests with governments of wealthy countries that are ignoring basic public health tenets.

"It's almost as if they've decided their main strategy for pandemic response is to purely protect themselves with more and more doses and to close borders to anyone who might bring the virus in. This is primitive thinking," Pai said. "The amount of money that would be required to vaccinate the whole world, and if you compare it with the carnage, the lives lost, the economic loss. ... It's the deal of the century."

In a statement last week, Gavi applauded Switzerland's decision to cede its place to COVAX in the queue to obtain Moderna vaccines.

That would mean COVAX will get 1 million doses later this year — putting it nearly an hour closer to its goal.

Cheng reported from London.

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

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.

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 the Biden administration's vaccine rules. Federal judges also have placed a hold on a mandate for health care workers in the Medicare and Medicaid programs.

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?

Justices' abortion remarks: Is it time to overturn Roe?

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court heard arguments in which it was asked to overturn a nationwide right to abortion that has existed for nearly 50 years.

The fate of the court's 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision legalizing abortion throughout the United States and its 1992 ruling in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, which reaffirmed *Roe*, probably won't be known until late June.

But during nearly two hours of arguments on Wednesday, conservative justices indicated they had questions about the court's current abortion framework. The justices were being asked to overrule the two seminal decisions in the context of a Mississippi law that bans abortion after 15 weeks. The court's *Roe* and *Casey* precedents say a state can regulate but not ban abortion before the point of viability, at about 24 weeks. All six conservative justices, including three appointed by former President Donald Trump, indicated they would uphold Mississippi's law.

In their writings and statements before Wednesday, Justice Clarence Thomas had been the only justice to call openly for overruling *Roe* and *Casey*.

Here are some of the things the justices said during arguments:

CONSERVATIVES:

Chief Justice John Roberts called a 15-week ban "not a dramatic departure from viability." He said: "If you think ... that women should have a choice to terminate their pregnancy, that supposes that there is a point at which they've had the fair choice, opportunity to choice, and why would 15 weeks be an inappropriate line? Because viability, it seems to me, doesn't have anything to do with choice. But, if it really is an issue about choice, why is 15 weeks not enough time?"

Justice Clarence Thomas suggested the right to abortion appears nowhere in the Constitution: "If we were talking about the Second Amendment, I know exactly what we're talking about. If we're talking about the Fourth Amendment, I know what we're talking about because it's written. It's there. What specifically is the right here that we're talking about?"

Justice Samuel Alito said people on both sides of the abortion issue have said the court's viability line "really doesn't make a lot of sense." He suggested a woman still "has the same interest in terminating her pregnancy after the viability line has been crossed." He added: "The fetus has an interest in having a life, and that doesn't change, does it, from the point before viability to the point after viability?"

Justice Neil Gorsuch asked what the court should do if it were to "reject the viability line." "Do you see any other intelligible principle that the court could choose?" he asked the Biden administration's top Supreme Court lawyer, who was arguing that Mississippi's ban should be struck down.

Justice Brett Kavanaugh suggested overruling precedent has been an important part of the court's history: "If you think about some of the most important cases, the most consequential cases in this court's history, there's a string of them where the cases overruled precedent." Kavanaugh cited cases that ex-

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tended rights beyond where they were previously, including those that outlawed segregation and said gay couples have a right to marry. "If we think that the prior precedents are seriously wrong, if that, why then doesn't the history of this court's practice with respect to those cases tell us that the right answer is actually a return to the position of neutrality and — and not stick with those precedents in the same way that all those other cases didn't?"

Justice Amy Coney Barrett 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. She asked about states "requiring the woman to go 15, 16 weeks more" past the point of viability "and then terminate parental rights at the conclusion." "Why didn't you address the safe haven laws and why don't they matter?" she asked a lawyer arguing against Mississippi's ban.

LIBERALS:

Justice Stephen Breyer said that where the court is overturning a watershed case like Roe it "better be damn sure" before doing so. He quoted the Casey case about the dangers of overruling precedent, saying: "To overrule under fire in the absence of the most compelling reason, to reexamine a watershed decision, would subvert the court's legitimacy beyond any serious question."

Justice Sonia Sotomayor said reversing Roe and Casey would damage the court. She asked: "Will this institution survive the stench that this creates in the public perception that the Constitution and its reading are just political acts?"

Justice Elena Kagan said of the current case: "I guess what strikes me when I look at this case is that, you know, not much has changed since Roe and Casey, that people think it's right or wrong based on the things that they have always thought it was right and wrong for." Since Roe, however, there's been "50 years of water under the bridge, 50 years of decisions saying that this is part of our law, that this is part of the fabric of women's existence in this country."

US jobless claims rise by 28,000, but still low at 222,000

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits rose last week even though the U.S. job market has been rebounding from last year's coronavirus recession.

Jobless claims climbed by 28,000 to 222,000 from the previous week's 52-year low 194,000, the Labor Department reported Thursday. The four-week average of claims, which smooths out week-to-week ups and downs, fell below 239,000, a pandemic low.

Since topping 900,000 in early January, the weekly applications — a proxy for layoffs — have been falling more or less steadily.

Overall, 2 million Americans were receiving traditional jobless benefits the week that ended Nov. 20, down by 107,000 from the week before.

Until Sept. 6, the federal government had supplemented state unemployment insurance programs by paying an extra payment of \$300 a week and extending benefits to gig workers and to those who were out of work for six months or more. Including the federal programs, the number of Americans receiving some form of jobless aid peaked at more than 33 million in June 2020.

The job market has rebounded strongly since the spring of 2020 when the coronavirus pandemic forced businesses to close or cut hours and kept many Americans at home as a health precaution. In March and April last year, employers slashed more than 22 million jobs.

But government relief checks, super-low interest rates and the rollout of vaccines combined to give consumers the confidence and financial wherewithal to start spending again. Employers, scrambling to meet an unexpected surge in demand, have made 18 million new hires since April 2020, and the jobs report out Friday is expected to show that they added another 535,000 in November. Still, the United States remains 4 million short of the jobs it had in February 2020.

Companies now complain that they can't find workers to fill job openings, a near-record 10.4 million in September. Workers, finding themselves with bargaining clout for the first time in decades, are becoming

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choosier about jobs; a record 4.4 million quit in September, a sign they have confidence in their ability to find something better.

Still, economists warn that that highly transmissible omicron variant could disrupt the economic rebound. "Workers are in high demand and businesses are reluctant to reduce their workforce amid persisting shortages," said Rubeela Farooqi, chief U.S. economist at High Frequency Economics. "Our base case was that supply (of workers) would gradually return as the cushion from savings diminished. However, renewed health concerns are a downside risk that may prevent people from returning to the workforce over coming months."

A world ablaze, captured by AP photographers in 2021

By The Associated Press undefined

"Some say the world will end in fire," wrote the poet Robert Frost — and for much of 2021, Associated Press photographers captured scenes of a world ablaze, amid rumblings of ruin.

In New Delhi, a man sprints amid the funeral pyres of COVID-19 victims — too many fires, too much heat, too many victims. On a beach near the village of Limni, Greece, the horizon is lit by the flames of wildfires raging across the eastern Mediterranean.

And at La Palma in the Canary Islands, the inferno is in the Cumbre Vieja volcano. But more than 10,000 million cubic meters of ash turn the world into a negative, with black ash taking the place of white snow.

Not all of the combustion is so literal.

There is fury: the astonishing moment when police aimed their guns at rioters trying to break into the House Chamber at the U.S. Capitol; Mexican demonstrators against gender violence, hurling themselves at barricades; an Ethiopian woman's wrath as she fights for every split pea in starving, war-torn Tigray.

And there are the sorrowful embers of violence. Stoic Palestinians carry the body of a child who died in an Israeli airstrike in Gaza, while a continent away, mourners bear the body of a man killed while protesting the coup in Myanmar. And in Haiti, the wife of slain President Jovenel Moise, Martine, leaves a memorial gathering in black widow's weeds and mask.

There was more to 2021, of course. There was fun: Lady Gaga wore one of the world's largest dresses to Joe Biden's inauguration.

There were moments of hope. Even as millions more died of COVID-19, billions were vaccinated. Health care worker Nazir Ahmed ventured to remote Kashmiri meadows to inoculate shepherds, some of them vaccine resistant. He stands in his protective gear on a hillock, like an emissary from COVID times who somehow found himself in a South Asian remake of "The Sound of Music."

There are other images that recall the movies, but askew.

Those men on horseback in 10-gallon hats are not the cowboys of classic Westerns; they're border agents, corralling Haitian migrants as they try to cross the Rio Grande into the United States.

And the man and woman caught in a passionate embrace in Barcelona, Spain, are not characters in a romantic comedy; behind them, a riot rages over the imprisonment of a rapper convicted of insulting the Spanish monarchy. And the streets are on fire.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, Dec. 3, the 337th day of 2021. There are 28 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 3, 1984, thousands of people died after a cloud of methyl isocyanate gas escaped from a pesticide plant operated by a Union Carbide subsidiary in Bhopal, India.

On this date:

In 1818, Illinois was admitted as the 21st state.

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In 1828, Andrew Jackson was elected president of the United States by the Electoral College.

In 1947, the Tennessee Williams play "A Streetcar Named Desire" opened on Broadway.

In 1964, police arrested some 800 students at the University of California at Berkeley, one day after the students stormed the administration building and staged a massive sit-in.

In 1967, a surgical team in Cape Town, South Africa, led by Dr. Christiaan Barnard (BAHR'-nard) performed the first human heart transplant on Louis Washkansky, who lived 18 days with the donor organ, which came from Denise Darvall, a 25-year-old bank clerk who had died in a traffic accident.

In 1979, 11 people were killed in a crush of fans at Cincinnati's Riverfront Coliseum, where the British rock group The Who was performing.

In 1992, the Greek tanker Aegean Sea spilled more than 21 million gallons of crude oil when it ran aground off northwestern Spain.

In 1994, AIDS activist Elizabeth Glaser, who along with her two children were infected with HIV because of a blood transfusion, died in Santa Monica, California, at age 47.

In 2000, poet Gwendolyn Brooks, the first African-American to win a Pulitzer Prize, died in Chicago at age 83.

In 2010, during a surprise holiday-season visit to Afghanistan, President Barack Obama told cheering U.S. troops at Bagram Air Field they were succeeding in their mission to fight terrorism; however, foul weather prevented Obama from meeting with President Hamid Karzai in Kabul to address frayed relations.

In 2015, defense Secretary Ash Carter ordered the armed services to open all military jobs to women, removing the final barriers that had kept women from serving in combat, including the most dangerous and grueling commando posts.

In 2017, the second-largest U.S. drugstore chain, CVS, announced that it was buying Aetna, the third-largest health insurer, in order to push much deeper into customer care.

Ten years ago: In Atlanta, a defiant Herman Cain suspended his faltering bid for the Republican presidential nomination amid a series of sexual misconduct allegations that he condemned as "false and unproven." Oklahoma State defeated Oklahoma 44-10 to win the Big 12 championship. (Exultant Oklahoma State fans stormed the football field, resulting in a dozen injuries.)

Five years ago: Some 20,000 people filled a tiny stadium in Chapeco, Brazil, to say goodbye to members of a soccer club who died in a plane crash in Colombia.

One year ago: A divided Wisconsin Supreme Court refused to hear President Donald Trump's attempt to overturn his election loss to Democrat Joe Biden in the battleground state; the court said the case must first wind its way through lower courts. As the number of daily U.S. deaths from the coronavirus topped 3,100 for the first time, states drafted plans for who would get the first doses of vaccine when they became available later in the month. Facebook said it would start removing false claims about COVID-19 vaccines.

Today's Birthdays: Movie director Jean-Luc Godard is 91. Singer Jaye P. Morgan is 90. Actor Nicolas Coster is 88. Actor Mary Alice is 80. Rock singer Ozzy Osbourne is 73. Rock singer Mickey Thomas is 72. Country musician Paul Gregg (Restless Heart) is 67. Actor Steven Culp is 66. Actor Daryl Hannah is 61. Actor Julianne Moore is 61. Olympic gold medal figure skater Katarina Witt is 56. Actor Brendan Fraser is 53. Singer Montell Jordan is 53. Actor Royale Watkins is 52. Actor Bruno Campos is 48. Actor Holly Marie Combs is 48. Actor Liza Lapira is 46. Pop-rock singer Daniel Bedingfield is 42. Actor/comedian Tiffany Haddish is 42. Actor Anna Chlumsky (KLUHM'-skee) is 41. Actor Jenna Dewan is 41. Actor Brian Bonsall is 40. Actor Dascha Polanco is 39. Pop/rock singer-songwriter Andy Grammer is 38. Americana musician Michael Calabrese (Lake Street Dive) is 37. Actor Amanda Seyfried is 36. Actor Michael Angarano is 34. Actor Jake T. Austin is 27.