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UpComing Events

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

Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9am-Noon

Wage Memorial Library/Groton City Hall Grand Opening, 9:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. with Mrs. Claus

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.

Monday, Dec. 13

4:30 p.m.: Junior High Wrestling at Webster

Junior High GBB hosts Warner. (7th at 6 p.m. followed by 8th grade game)

7 p.m.: School Board Meeting

Thursday, Dec. 16

Basketball Double Header with Hamlin at Groton. Girls JV at 4 p.m., Boys JV at 5 p.m., Girls Varsity at 6:15 p.m. followed by boys varsity.

Friday, Dec. 17

Brookings Bell Debate

Saturday, Dec. 18

Brookings Bell Debate

10 a.m.: Wrestling at Sioux Valley High School

Boys Basketball at Sioux Falls Lutheran. JV at 3 p.m. with varsity at 4 p.m.

"There is nothing on this earth more to be prized than true friendship."

-Thomas Aquinas



Conde National League

Dec. 6 Team Standings

Mets 34 (winner of first half), Pirates 28, Cubs 27, Tigers 27, Braves 22, Giants 18

Men's High Games: Ryan Bethke 224, 223, 205; Butch Farmen 201; Wes Graff 179.

Men's High Series: Ryan Bethke 652, Butch Farmen 479, Brody Somke 475

Women's High Games: Sam Bahr 182, Cheryl Reyalts 175, Nancy Radke 171

Women's High Series: Sam Bahr 486, Vickie Kramp 466, Nancy Radke 431

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

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.
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Mr. & Mrs. Claus are coming to Groton!

**Grand
Opening!**



of Wage Memorial Library and City Hall

120 N Main, Groton

Saturday, Dec. 11, 9:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m.

Mrs. Claus will be at the library and there will be Christmas cookie decorating with Kate's Confections (treats will also be for sale).



**Across the street
Santa will be at
Professional
Management Services
from 9 a.m. to Noon.**



DACOTAH BANK

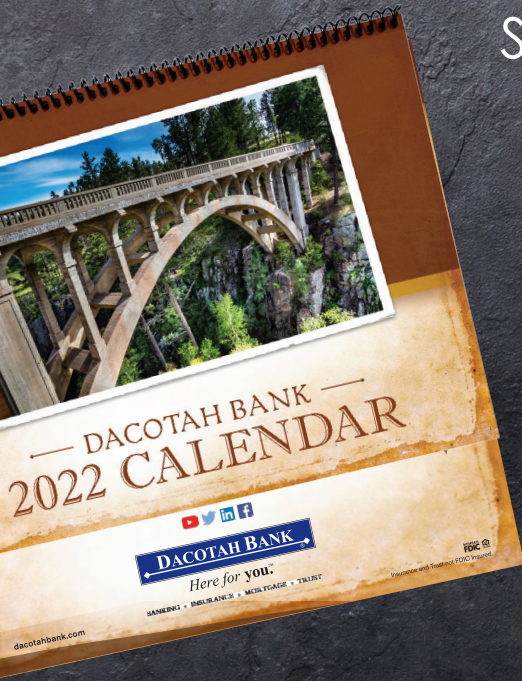
Cookies & Calendar OPEN HOUSE

Stop by the Groton Dacotah Bank
for cookies, coffee, cider
& a calendar

FRI. *December 17*

9:00 am - 5:00 pm

7 East US Hwy 12 • (605) 397-2711



South Dakota Public Higher Education Drives \$2.1 Billion of State's Economy; Sustains More Than 12,000 Jobs

PIERRE, S.D. – Across six universities, South Dakota public higher education institutions generated a total impact on the state's economy of more than \$2.1 billion in Fiscal Year 2019, according to an economic contribution analysis released today. The study further concludes that the economic activity of the public university system supported or sustained 12,354 jobs throughout the state.

"These economic impact numbers reflect the importance of our system's work across the state. It shows our universities are making an impact in the communities they serve and retaining graduates to continue to grow our workforce and economy," said John W. Bastian, president of the South Dakota Board of Regents.

The study measured the economic contribution of South Dakota's public higher education institutions under the direction and leadership of the Board of Regents. The study calculates the impact of operations, student spending, and visitor spending across six universities: Black Hills State University, Dakota State University, Northern State University, South Dakota Mines, South Dakota State University, and the University of South Dakota.

"The mission of the Board of Regents is to govern the system of public higher education across South Dakota. That ensures higher education is resourced and delivered to maximize results," said Brian L. Maher, the regents' executive director & CEO. "This is a commitment we take seriously, with an ultimate goal to advance communities statewide. We are proud of the work we do for students, families, and citizens. Our system's economic impact is a strong and stable indicator of our duty as stewards of public higher education."

The study was conducted by Parker Philips, Inc., a nationally recognized consulting firm specializing in economic impact analysis. Nichole Parker, President and Principal at Parker Philips, said, "Economic contribution is an objective way to measure the significance of an organization in the statewide economy. It is a tool that policymakers can use to view the economic value and return on investment in public higher education. South Dakota's public universities are stable and sustainable economic drivers that are making a demonstrable impact across the entire state. Each of these universities understands their unique niche and the needs of the South Dakotans they serve."

Among the findings in the study:

The \$2.1 billion total economic impact of public higher education in FY19, which included \$1.3 billion direct and \$0.8 billion indirect and induced spending, was the result of operational spending, capital spending, payroll and benefits paid to employees, student spending, and visitor spending.

The operations of the system supported or sustained a total of 12,354 jobs — 2.7% of South Dakota's workforce.

Through its local spending and the jobs it supported or sustained, the public university system generated \$74.1 million in state and local taxes.

The staff, faculty, and students of the system contribute an estimated \$16.7 million annually in charitable giving and volunteerism.

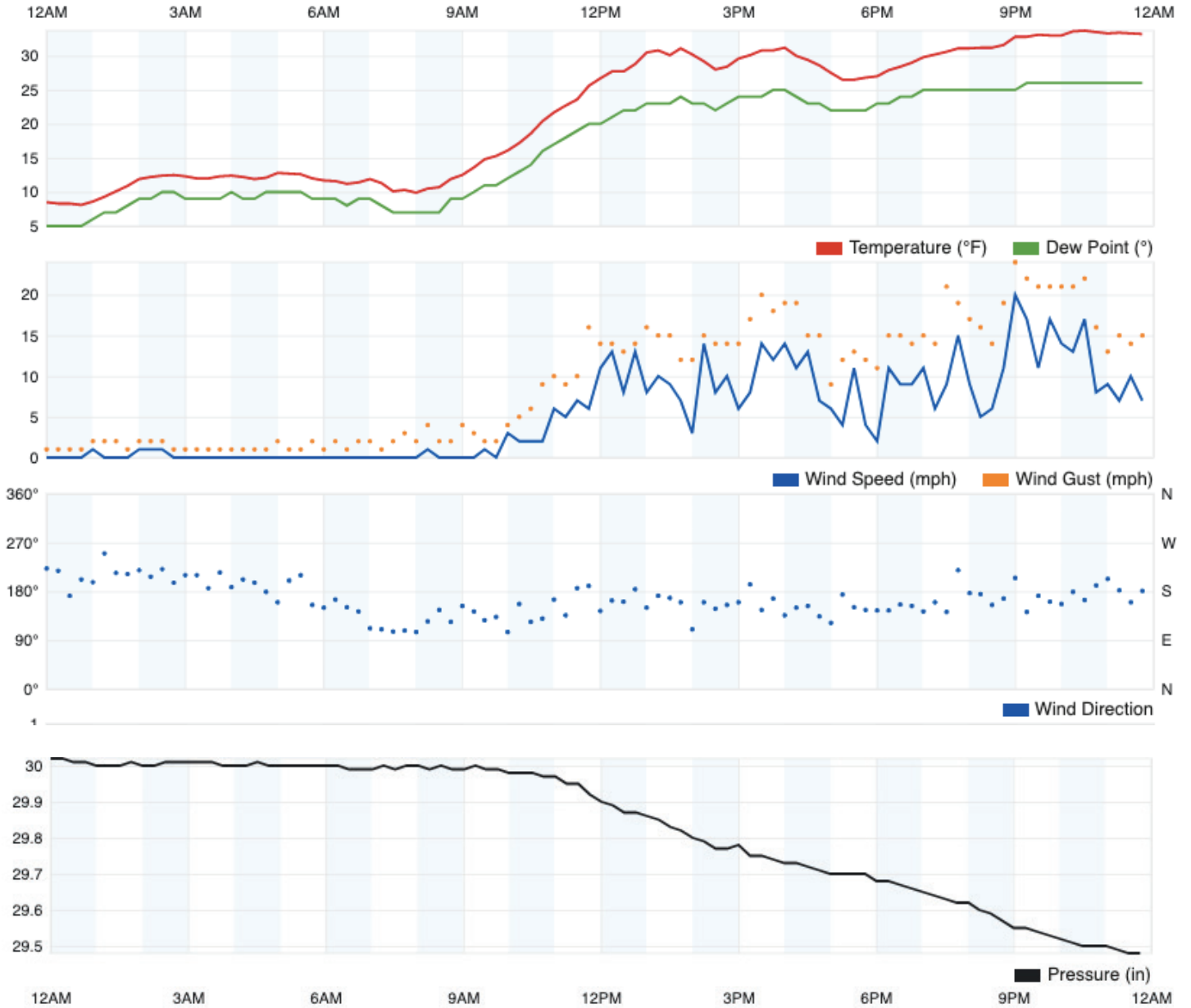
The public university system supported or sustained 4% of South Dakota's economy.

In addition to the significant impact of campus operations, the report also found that the income being added into the economy as a result of graduates obtaining post-secondary education is significant. The six universities conferred 6,665 bachelor, masters, doctoral, and professional degrees in 2019. The total number of alumni living and working in the state is more than 104,000, a group that will generate \$287.5 billion over their careers, support 1.9 million jobs, and generate \$12.9 billion in taxes.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Friday	Friday Night	Saturday
				
Mostly Sunny	Partly Cloudy then Patchy Fog	Slight Chance Snow and Patchy Fog 20%	Decreasing Clouds	Sunny
High: 38 °F	Low: 17 °F	High: 32 °F	Low: 15 °F	High: 36 °F

Timing Out Snow Tonight/Friday

Probability of Precipitation Forecast

	12/9 Thu					12/10 Fri																					
	7pm	8pm	9pm	10pm	11pm	12am	1am	2am	3am	4am	5am	6am	7am	8am	9am	10am	11am	12pm	1pm	2pm	3pm	4pm	5pm	6pm	7pm	8pm	9pm
Aberdeen	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	5	8	15	12	9	9	5	6	15	14	11	4	3	1	3	3	3	2
Britton	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	5	5	3	9	7	9	4	3	8	9	7	10	6	1	6	6	6	4
Eagle Butte	0	0	0	1	3	4	5	7	21	26	28	56	63	51	34	18	14	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Eureka	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	3	3	2	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Gettysburg	0	0	0	0	2	4	7	5	10	11	16	45	50	45	25	42	45	30	18	5	3	1	1	0	0	0	1
Kennebec	0	3	12	10	14	36	41	45	64	72	70	74	90	100	100	100	96	66	64	55	51	34	21	1	1	1	2
McIntosh	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	6	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Milbank	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	3	3	14	12	15	24	18	30	42	50	67	62	56	56	49	40	31	31	31	15
Miller	0	0	0	1	3	8	8	14	43	47	51	66	77	86	91	84	80	69	68	54	44	25	14	3	3	3	3
Mobridge	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	4	4	4	4	3	3	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Murdo	2	7	13	15	17	60	64	62	70	75	62	72	82	98	100	100	87	38	39	37	47	28	4	1	1	1	1
Pierre	0	0	3	9	13	22	22	23	50	57	58	67	79	80	84	84	79	59	53	42	34	20	4	0	0	0	1
Redfield	0	0	0	0	1	7	4	5	13	17	17	48	53	48	60	67	68	67	62	54	21	17	7	4	4	4	4
Sisseton	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	8	7	10	12	10	11	12	11	16	19	18	16	15	8	13	13	13	8
Watertown	0	0	0	0	0	4	6	3	12	17	16	55	55	60	68	91	88	86	81	78	72	53	44	24	24	24	13
Wheaton	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	3	7	11	10	9	11	11	16	16	16	17	16	6	14	14	14	9

With a slight northwards shift in the expected track, we are looking at potentially more coverage of snowfall across a number of communities that we forecast for. This graphic covers onset and overall timing of snow.

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Today in Weather History

December 9, 1961: A snowstorm moved through the area and dropped 3 to 6 inches of snow east of the Missouri River and 1 to 3 inches to the west of the river from late afternoon on the 8th through late afternoon on the 9th. The storm was accompanied by high winds, blowing snow, icy highways, and temperatures falling to near zero. Three men were killed and one injured in a two-car crash near Watertown as snow and blowing snow sharply reduced visibilities. A skidding accident on a slippery highway near Winner resulted in an automobile fatality of one man. In a rural area near Vale, in Meade County, one man abandoned his stalled vehicle and was found the next day, frozen to death. 6 inches of snow fell at Sisseton and Wheaton, with 5 inches at Aberdeen and Watertown and 3 inches at Mobridge. Only an inch fell at Pierre.

December 9, 1917: A severe winter storm struck the Ohio Valley and the Great Lakes Region. It produced 25 inches of snow and wind gusts to 78 mph at Buffalo NY. The storm produced 26 inches of snow at Vevay Indiana, with drifts fourteen feet high.

December 9, 2003: Although it never threatened land, a subtropical storm became Tropical Storm Peter approx. 700 miles WNW of the Cape Verde Islands. Combined with Tropical Storm Odette from earlier in the month, this is the first time since 1887 that two tropical storms formed in the Atlantic Basin in December.

1786 - A second great snowstorm in just five days brought another 15 inches of snow to Morristown NJ, on top of the eight inches which fell on the 7th and 8th, and the 18 inches which fell on the 4th and 5th. The total snowfall for the week was thus 41 inches. New Haven CT received 17 inches of new snow in the storm. Up to four feet of snow covered the ground in eastern Massachusetts following the storms. (9th-10th) (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1917 - A severe winter storm struck the Ohio Valley and the Great Lakes Region. It produced 25 inches of snow and wind gusts to 78 mph at Buffalo NY. The storm produced 26 inches of snow at Vevay IND, with drifts fourteen feet high. By the 16th of the month people could walk across the frozen Ohio River from Vevay into Kentucky. (8th-9th) (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1987 - The fifth storm in nine days kept the northwestern U.S. wet and windy. Winds along the coast of Washington gusted to 75 mph at Oceans Shores and at Hoquiam, and the northern and central coastal mountains of Oregon were drenched with three inches of rain in ten hours, flooding some rivers. Snowfall totals in the Cascade Mountains of Washington State ranged up to 36 inches in the Methow Valley. High winds in Oregon blew a tree onto a moving automobile killing three persons and injuring two others at Mill City. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - A winter storm blanketed the Southern and Central Appalachians with up to ten inches of snow. Arctic air invaded the north central U.S. bringing subzero cold to Minnesota and North Dakota. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - A strong storm produced wind gusts of 40 to 65 mph from the Alaska Peninsula to the North Gulf Coast of Alaska. Southeasterly winds gusted to 75 mph in the Anchorage hillside. Gusty winds associated with a strong cold front caused a power outage across much of the island of Hawaii. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

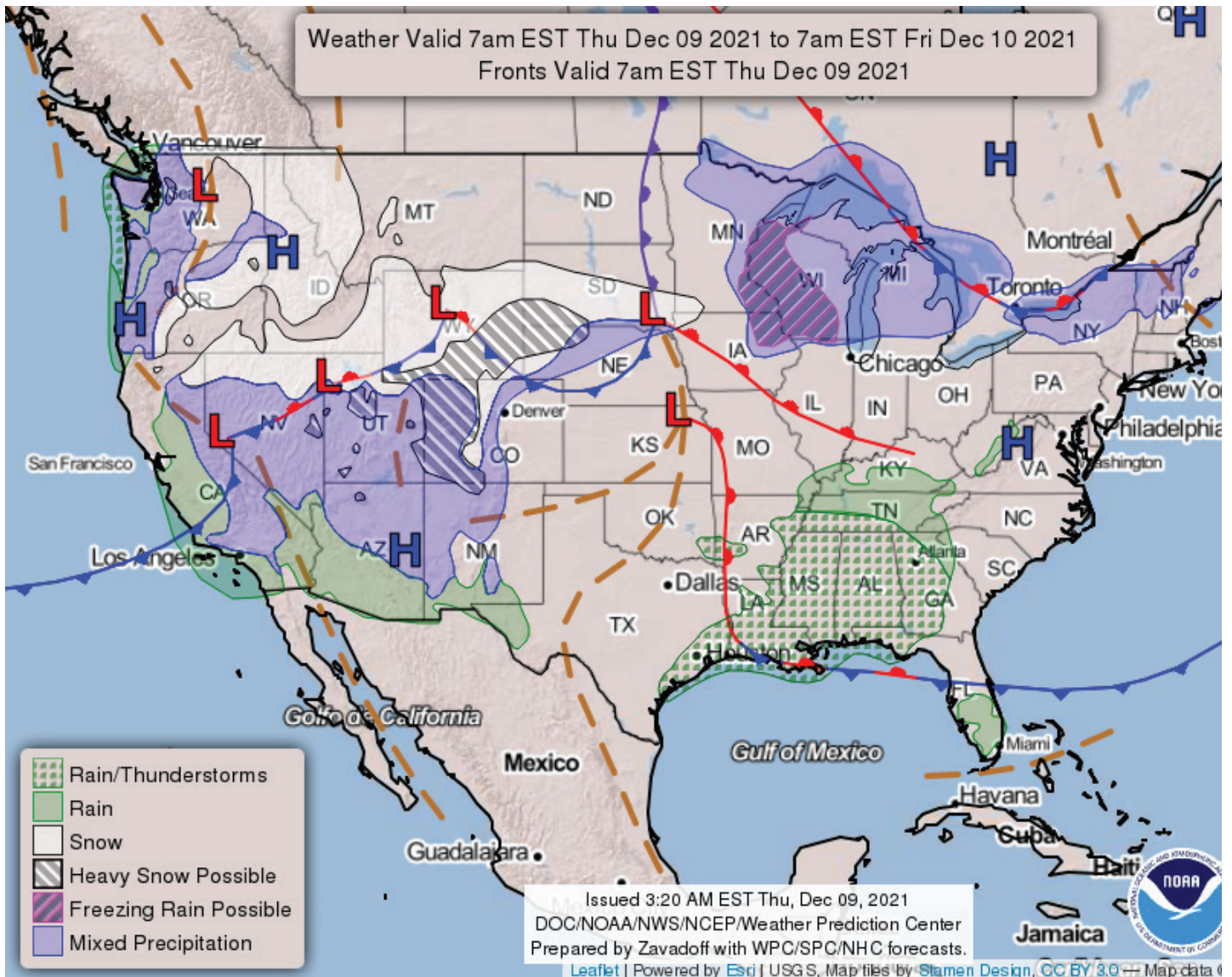
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 33.7 °F at 10:30 PM
Low Temp: 8.1 °F at 12:45 M
Wind: 24 mph at 9:00 PM
Precip: 0.00

Record High: 61° in 1939
Record Low: -27° in 1955
Average High: 31°F
Average Low: 10°F
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.18
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.11
Average Precip to date: 21.39
Precip Year to Date: 19.97
Sunset Tonight: 4:50:53 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:59:54 AM





THE PROMISE OF PEACE

A professor stood before his class and boasted, "The Bible is false. It cannot be believed. It says, 'Peace and goodwill toward men.' History cannot account for a time when there were no wars!"

Disturbed, Arthur went to his pastor and related the incident. Calmly, his pastor said, "Art, that's not what the angels said. They said, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth among men with whom He is pleased.'"

Politicians speak of peace through treaties and boundaries, threats and sanctions, wars and rumors of wars. But that is not the peace that God speaks of in His Word. His Word speaks of a peace that comes through salvation and surrender to the Prince of Peace. It is a peace that comes from the new heart that He implants within us. It is a peace that Christians enjoy when we open the door to our hearts and allow Him to come in and rule our lives.

The peace that Scripture speaks of will never come from a non-peaceful source. It is a peace that comes through the risen Christ and has its source in God Himself.

We cannot find peace in a turbulent, war-torn world until we make peace with God through Jesus Christ. Only when we go to Him in humility and with faith, trust, and surrender, repent and ask for His forgiveness will He grant us His peace.

Prayer: We pray, Father for Your peace – a peace that comes from the God of all comfort Who gives us His peace that assures us of His presence in our lives. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Luke 2:13-14 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"

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2021 Community Events

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

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The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

Subscription Form

All prices listed include 6.5% Sales Tax

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- Colored \$42.60/6 months
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News from the Associated Press

Dixon scores 35 to lead Idaho over S. Dakota St. 98-84

MOSCOW, Idaho (AP) — Mikey Dixon had a career-high 35 points as Idaho beat South Dakota State 98-84 on Wednesday night.

Dixon hit 5 of 7 3-pointers and went 16 for 16 from the foul line. He added eight assists.

Rashad Smith had 16 points and seven rebounds for Idaho (2-7), which broke its six-game losing streak. Trevante Anderson added 15 points, eight assists and seven rebounds. Tanner Christensen had 14 points.

Baylor Scheierman scored a season-high 22 points and had 14 rebounds for the Jackrabbits (8-3). Noah Freidel added 15 points. Douglas Wilson had 15 points.

For more AP college basketball coverage: <https://apnews.com/hub/college-basketball> and http://twitter.com/AP_Top25

This was generated by Automated Insights, <http://www.automatedinsights.com/ap>, using data from STATS LLC, <https://www.stats.com>

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Dakota Cash

05-13-14-16-28

(five, thirteen, fourteen, sixteen, twenty-eight)

Estimated jackpot: \$20,000

Lotto America

02-11-17-41-46, Star Ball: 9, ASB: 3

(two, eleven, seventeen, forty-one, forty-six; Star Ball: nine; ASB: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$4.88 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$135 million

Powerball

03-07-33-50-69, Powerball: 24, Power Play: 2

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

Estimated jackpot: \$291 million

House committee wants trust secrecy cut after Pandora Papers

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Democrats on a U.S. House committee pushed Wednesday for reducing the financial secrecy that has allowed many of the world's richest and most powerful to hide their assets in South Dakota and other trust-friendly states.

During a hearing called by the Oversight Subcommittee for the House Ways and Means Committee, Democrats said they were appalled by revelations in an investigation by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, dubbed the Pandora Papers, that show a booming, secretive trust industry in the United States, with South Dakota leading the way.

Advocates for greater financial transparency urged House lawmakers to make sure a recently-announced initiative from President Joe Biden's administration sweeps trusts into reporting requirements for law enforcement and financial regulators.

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"Letting this accumulation of hidden wealth go unchecked will only exacerbate our two-tier tax system," said U.S. Rep. Bill Pascrell, a New Jersey Democrat who chairs the subcommittee. "I will not be complicit in further-cementing a have and have-not economy."

The federal government potentially stepping in to regulate trust industries would likely be an unwelcome development for Republican lawmakers in South Dakota, who have worked closely with the trust industry to develop a financial haven. When the Pandora Papers investigation revealed in October that South Dakota had forged the way for the United States to become a leading destination for the world's wealthy to park their assets, the state's GOP wore the distinction as a badge of honor.

Pascrell on Wednesday singled South Dakota out as the "the Grand Cayman of the Great Plains" but also acknowledged that Democratic-run states have indulged in the practice. Trusts in South Dakota have more than quadrupled over the past decade to \$360 billion in assets, including an increase of \$100 billion in the last three years, the Pandora Papers investigation showed.

South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem, a Republican who sat on the House Ways and Means Committee while in Congress, declined an invitation to testify at Wednesday's hearing, saying she had prior commitments. Her office did not immediately respond to a request for comment from the Associated Press. Pascrell said he would send a list of questions to the governor.

During Wednesday's hearing, Republican members mostly objected to the committee's topic, saying instead they should be looking into recent leaks of tax information. They also cast trusts as an innocuous practice that small business owners use and pointed out that the Pandora Papers investigation didn't find any explicitly illegal activity.

"No one here supports foreign nationals laundering money in the United States," said U.S. Rep. Mike Kelly, a Republican from Pennsylvania. "I worry that the majority wants to go after trusts in the U.S. generally through massive reporting regimes and new regulations. But farmers, small businesses and millions of average Americans use trusts to plan for the future."

However, more than 330 current and former politicians identified as beneficiaries of the secret accounts include Jordan's King Abdullah II, former U.K. Prime Minister Tony Blair, Czech Republic Prime Minister Andrej Babis, Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta, Ecuador's President Guillermo Lasso, and associates of both Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Erica Hanichak, the government affairs director with the Financial Accountability and Corporate Transparency Coalition, told the committee, "It is imperative that Congress fill its oversight and appropriations role to aid the administration in denying financial safe haven, not only to tax evaders, but also to drug traffickers, human rights abusers, kleptocrats, terror financiers and sanctions dodgers."

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined
Yankton Press & Dakotan. December 7, 2021.
Editorial: Hospitals Facing New Round Of Stress

Like many hospitals across the country, Yankton's Avera Sacred Heart Hospital (ASHH) is facing another whirlwind, with an increasing patient load as well as staffing issues combining to generate even more stress on everyone.

A story in Friday's Press & Dakotan examined the pressures faced at ASHH in the face of a new COVID-19 surge. It's an unfortunately familiar tale both here and elsewhere.

But it's also a problem that cannot be viewed solely through a pandemic lens, although COVID is certainly an important factor.

The hospital's intensive care unit (ICU) often nears or reaches capacity, but patients with other, non-COVID issues also need ICU attention at times, and that combines to create a critical mass that impacts the staff.

"Most of the communities think COVID has passed by. You see very few masks and not much of a discussion (about) this resumption of activities as normal," said Doug Ekeren, ASHH's regional president

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and CEO. "For our staff, who is taking care of COVID patients every day, they are tired."

Ekeren pointed to a national shortage of health care workers that is also plaguing the hospital. He said this isn't primarily due to workers resisting COVID vaccination mandates. The Avera system has such a policy, and while that has peeled away a few workers, Ekeren said, he noted that a "very strong majority" of workers thought a mandate was "the right thing ... to do." The health industry is facing the same hiring issues that have been impacting other industries and professions for several years: the lack of prospects for open positions, especially among highly skilled slots.

Thus, the pandemic with its many waves, the other medical issues with which hospitals must contend and the tight hiring market are putting intense pressure on medical facilities.

Ekeren said, "There are times where we might have to say 'no' to a potential admission and help that person find admission to another facility. We've had a few times where we have had to delay some elective surgical procedures that might take a bed."

Further compounding the issue, Ekeren said, is that the COVID patients they see now who do end up in the ICU usually stay there longer. Because of that, he said, "we've had time periods where we did not have an ICU bed available in Yankton and there were not ICU beds available in Sioux Falls or Sioux City, Omaha or Lincoln."

So, while this current COVID surge may not seem as bad as last fall, for instance, there is still a cumulative effect that is creating hardships.

We once again are indebted to the medical staff at ASHH and other facilities who must deal with this stress and uncertainty, all because they need to be there for us.

As Ekeren said, we should be thankful for the sacrifices and long hours these workers put in.

It remains a difficult job, and we would be much, much worse off without them.

Black Hills Pioneer. December 4, 2021.

Editorial: Give a hoot, don't pollute

You've probably noticed the new wildlife fence lining both sides of Interstate 90 from Exit 8 to Exit 14.

Hopefully, now that it is complete, fewer deer will be struck by vehicles. Not only do those collisions kill deer, but they also cost vehicle owners and insurance companies thousands of dollars and risk injury or death to the people in the vehicles.

And you've probably also noticed stuck in the fence was a mountain of trash.

Grocery bags, plastic bottles, tarps, Styrofoam, paper — just garbage.

The fence does a great job of catching it after it was scattered by high winds.

Garbage being blown around is just a fact of living amongst humans. But the amount that has been visually captured is rather embarrassing. There are things we can do to minimize them.

Place your garbage in a bag and tie it shut before throwing it in the garbage. Recycle. Place garbage cans in a protected area and keep the lid on it. And here's the big one. Don't litter.

We've all seen those empty beer cans or pop bottles along the side of the road.

One friend who routinely picks up roadside trash said one particular driver or passenger of a vehicle must purchase a beverage on the way home and drink it at the same rate, as there is consistently a number of the same variety of empty beer bottle at one particular spot on the side of the road.

Walt Longmire was accused of drinking and driving when he crashed his Bronco on the hit show Longmire. But everyone knew he only drank Rainier beer and the empties in the back of his rig were not of that variety. He was picking up empties along the road before he crashed.

Tucker Carlson recently gave an interview on The Meat Eater's podcast. On it, he discussed conservation and ethics in the outdoors. And while he said he grew up in a time when it was acceptable to be sexually promiscuous, just about the worst thing you could do was to litter.

If that doesn't say a lot, what does?

Fortunately, there are some pretty good people in the community.

A couple days after the trash accumulated in the fence, some kind soul or souls, picked the garbage

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out of the fence. We thank them and the other people who help keep our communities clean.

And for those people who find it easier to roll down their window and toss their refuse – Shame.

In the words of Woodsy Owl, "Give a hoot — don't pollute!" Or if you'd rather follow his current motto, "Lend a hand — care for the land!"

END

Mistrial declared in Pennington County murder case

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — A judge in Pennington County judge has declared a mistrial in a murder case after discovering that prosecutors failed to inform the defense in a timely manner that immunity had been granted to several key witnesses.

Judge Matthew Brown did not immediately rule on whether the mistrial is with prejudice which would prevent prosecutors from refileing a second-degree murder charge against Barry Allman. He was on trial in the August 2020 stabbing death of 33-year-old Lance Baumgarten.

If the mistrial is without prejudice, Baumgarten could be retried.

Defense attorney John Murphy said the mistrial was declared after it was discovered that the Pennington County State's Attorney's Office failed to inform his team until Tuesday that it had granted immunity to four witnesses who were present when Baumgarten was stabbed at a Rapid City apartment, the Rapid City Journal reported.

Murphy said the witnesses were granted immunity as recently as eight days prior, but according to email records Deputy State's Attorney Roxanne Hammond did not send notification or documents outlining the immunity agreements until less than an hour before one of the witnesses was due to take the stand.

Prosecutors are required to disclose evidence to the defense when it has learned of information favorable to the defense, per a U.S. Supreme Court rule.

A briefing on the mistrial is due to be filed by Dec. 17, Murphy said.

Woman, man killed in McCook County highway crash

SALEM, S.D. (AP) — Two people have died in a highway crash in southeastern South Dakota.

A 22-year-old woman and a 60-year-old man were killed Tuesday when the cars they were driving collided east of Salem in McCook County, the Highway Patrol said.

According to the patrol, the male driver crossed the center line on Highway 38 and collided with the woman's vehicle. Both drivers were pronounced dead at the scene.

The victims have not been identified.

NATO, Ukraine autonomy pose diplomatic challenges for Biden

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER, MATTHEW LEE and NOMAAN MERCHANT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden said this week the U.S. would take a more direct role in diplomacy to address Vladimir Putin's concerns over Ukraine and Europe, part of a broader effort to dissuade the Russian leader from a destabilizing invasion of Ukraine.

But any negotiations to peacefully resolve Europe's tangled East-West rivalries will present minefields for the U.S. president.

Administration officials have suggested that the U.S. will press Ukraine to formally cede a measure of autonomy to eastern Ukrainian lands now controlled by Russia-backed separatists who rose up against Kyiv in 2014. An undefined "special status" for those areas was laid out in an ambiguous, European-brokered peace deal in 2015, but it has never taken hold.

Biden also will have to finesse Ukraine's desire to join NATO. The U.S. and NATO reject Putin's demands that they guarantee Ukraine won't be admitted to the Western military alliance.

But senior State Department officials have told Ukraine that NATO membership is unlikely to be approved in the next decade, according to a person familiar with those private talks who spoke on condition

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of anonymity.

For Biden, the challenge will be encouraging Kyiv to accept some of the facts on the ground in eastern Ukraine, without appearing to cave to Putin — a perception that could embolden the Russian leader and unleash a fresh line of condemnations by Republicans as Biden's popularity is already in decline.

Ukraine may be asked "can you make some step forward on these areas," said Steven Pifer, a former U.S. ambassador to Ukraine. That could include measures such as allowing the Russia-allied Donbas region to control its own health care, police and schools, he said.

"But I don't see Washington pushing the Ukrainians to take steps that would compromise their sovereignty or the ability of the national government when it came to making decisions," Pifer said.

Biden made his offers of American diplomacy as part of a two-hour online session with Putin on Tuesday. Biden offered U.S. participation in negotiation efforts alongside Europeans, not just to settle the conflict in eastern Ukraine but to address Putin's larger strategic objections to NATO expanding membership and building military capacity ever closer to Russia's borders.

On Thursday, Biden is due to speak to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

Ukraine, which has deep cultural and historic ties with Russia, has in recent years sought closer integration with the West and membership in NATO. The alliance has held out the promise of membership but it has declined to set a timeline. Even before the current crisis, Ukraine was a long way from joining.

Since 2014, however, when Russia invaded and annexed Crimea and then threw its weight behind the armed separatists in Ukraine's eastern Donbas region, the United States and other NATO members have been helping Ukraine build up its defenses.

National security adviser Jake Sullivan stressed at a White House briefing after Biden's call with Putin that "there was the delivery of defensive assistance to Ukraine just very recently, and that will continue."

Pentagon press secretary John Kirby said Wednesday the last items in the administration's latest \$60 million package of security assistance to Ukraine are arriving there this week and consist mainly of small arms and ammunition.

The call between Biden and Putin took place as tensions grew over the threat of Russian forces again rolling into Ukraine. Putin denies any such intention and charges that it is NATO strengthening its hold in former Soviet republics that is threatening Russia.

U.S. intelligence reports last week said Russia had moved 70,000 troops to Ukraine's borders as it builds toward a possible invasion early next year.

If Russia were to invade, the Biden administration has made clear the country would face the toughest U.S. sanctions yet.

After speaking with Zelenskyy, Biden plans to brief leaders of nine NATO members in Eastern Europe, including three former Soviet republics. It's part of weeks of coordination with NATO allies on the response to the Russian military buildup on Ukraine's border.

Before and after his call with Putin, Biden spoke with the leaders of Britain, France, Germany and Italy. France and Germany took the lead in brokering the 2015 peace deal between Ukraine and the Russia-backed rebels, in what's known as the Normandy format.

"We hope by Friday we're gonna be able to say, announce to you, we're having meetings at a higher level," Biden said Wednesday. "Not just with us, but with at least four of our major NATO allies, and Russia."

The meetings would address "the future of Russia's concern relative to NATO writ large, and whether or not we could work out any accommodations as it relates to bringing down the temperature" in Ukraine's east," Biden said.

Asked about any need for Ukrainian compromises, Sullivan told reporters Tuesday that "Ukrainians have come forward with constructive ideas for how to move the diplomacy forward. We're encouraging that."

Under the 2015 deal, Ukraine agreed to change its constitution to accommodate the "peculiarities" of the two Donbas separatist republics and to legalize their "special status." Some analysts said the deal's vagueness, and some conflicting requirements, make its provisions effectively unworkable.

Ukraine is willing to engage in talks on defining "special status," including possible changes that account

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for the cultural and linguistic differences of its eastern Donbas region, which has a higher proportion of native Russian speakers, the person familiar with the private talks between Ukraine and the United States said.

But Ukraine would reject any change that gives the region virtual veto power over national policy, the person said.

Alexander Vershbow, a former U.S. ambassador to Moscow, said a reinvigoration of previous negotiating efforts among diplomats from France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine could be a step forward, particularly if the U.S. became directly involved.

In an interview before the Biden-Putin video meeting, Vershbow said another option would be to recreate the U.S.-Russia channel of talks used during the Obama administration in parallel with those talks.

"It has to be very much in lockstep with the Ukrainians — not behind their backs, or forcing them to accept a distasteful compromise," Vershbow said.

Associated Press writers Robert Burns and Amer Madhani in Washington contributed to this story.

Biden to decry democracy 'recession' at White House summit

By AMER MADHANI and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden plans to urge participants at the first White House Summit for Democracy to reverse an ongoing "recession" of democracy that is playing out at a time of rising authoritarianism around the globe and extraordinary strains on foundational institutions in the U.S.

The two-day virtual summit that starts Thursday has been billed as an opportunity for leaders and civil society experts from some 110 countries to collaborate on fighting corruption and promoting respect for human rights. But the gathering already has drawn backlash from the United States' chief adversaries and other nations that were not invited to participate.

The ambassadors to the U.S. from China and Russia wrote a joint essay in the National Interest policy journal describing the Biden administration as exhibiting a "Cold-War mentality" that will "stoke up ideological confrontation and a rift in the world." The administration has also faced scrutiny over how it went about deciding which countries to invite.

The Biden administration, for its part, says the virtual gathering is a critical meeting at a moment when a profound diminishment of freedoms is trending around the globe. Biden has said that confronting that dynamic is "the challenge of our time."

White House spokeswoman Karine Jean-Pierre said Biden, who is scheduled to address the summit at its opening Thursday and again Friday, will call on participants to dedicate themselves to "reversing the democratic recession and ensuring that democracies deliver for their people."

Biden also plans to speak about the importance of voting rights at home, much as he did at an anniversary celebration of the capital's Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial, according to a senior administration official who previewed the event for reporters on the condition of anonymity. At the time, Biden called voting a "fundamental right" and decried efforts to curtail it as "the most un-American thing" imaginable.

The summit comes as U.S. democracy faces grave challenges to its institutions and traditions.

Local elected officials are resigning at an alarming rate amid confrontations with angry voices at school board meetings, elections offices and town halls. States are passing laws to limit access to the ballot, making it more difficult for Americans to vote. And the Jan. 6 attack at the Capitol has left many in Donald Trump's Republican party clinging to his false claims of a stolen election, eroding trust in the accuracy of the vote.

Biden has said passage of his ambitious domestic agenda — the \$1 trillion bipartisan infrastructure bill he signed into law, as well as the roughly \$2 trillion "Build Back Better Act" of social and climate change initiatives moving through the Senate — will demonstrate how democracy can improve people's lives.

Some advocates also want Biden to focus on other ways to shore up democracy at home. One early test will come Thursday as the House moves to approve the Protecting Our Democracy Act, the third in a

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trio of bills — alongside the Freedom to Vote Act and the John Lewis Voting Rights Act — largely backed by Democrats in Congress but stalled by Republicans in the Senate.

“The United States has a thriving democracy, but it’s been hurting in recent years,” said Michael Abramowitz, the president of Freedom House, whose annual report marked a 15th consecutive year of a global democratic slide. “Right now, we’re going through a phase in America where it’s very difficult to get things done and to really prove that democracy can deliver.”

Biden has made promoting democratic values a focal point of his foreign policy and has repeatedly stressed the need for the U.S. and other like-minded allies to demonstrate that democracies are a better vehicle for societies than autocracies.

But over the first year of his presidency, democratic freedoms have continued to erode.

In its new annual report released Wednesday, CIVICUS Monitor, a global rights index, said 13 countries saw their civic freedoms downgraded in 2021 from the previous year. Only one, Mongolia, saw civic freedoms improve, according to the report. Of the 197 countries graded by the group, only 39 were rated as open societies.

A Pew Research Center report released this week said that while “people like democracy, their commitment to it is often not very strong.” Even wealthy countries, including the U.S., have some people who favor military rule, the report said.

Another group, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, said in its annual report that the number of countries experiencing democratic backsliding “has never been as high” as the past decade, with the U.S. added to the list alongside India and Brazil.

Chinese officials have offered a stream of public criticism about the summit, with one senior government official even calling it a “joke.” They have also expressed outrage over the administration inviting Taiwan to take part in the gathering. China claims the self-governing island as part of its territory and objects to it having any contact on its own with foreign governments.

“The U.S. side claims that its so-called democracy summit is to defend democracy, then I can’t help asking with the most abundant and advanced medical resources and technology, how could the U.S. allow more than 800,000 of its people to die from the virus and leave nearly 50 million people suffering the COVID still?” China’s Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian said this week. “With such human rights tragedies, how can the U.S. defend democracy?”

Other uninvited countries have shown their displeasure. Hungary, the only European Union member not invited, tried to block EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen from speaking on behalf of the bloc at the summit. During the 2020 campaign, Biden referred to Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban as a “thug.”

The White House declined to say how it went about deciding who was invited and who was left off the list.

For example, Turkey, a fellow NATO member, and Egypt, a key U.S. ally in the Middle East, were also left off. The Biden administration has raised human rights concerns about both nations. However, Poland, which has faced criticism for undermining the independence of its judiciary and media, was invited.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said the invitation list was not meant to be a “stamp of approval or disapproval.”

“It’s just meant to have a diverse range of voices and faces and representatives at the discussion,” she said.

Associated Press writer Tracy Brown and video producer Liu Zheng in Beijing contributed to this report.

Witness, official: Myanmar troops massacre 11 in retaliation

By GRANT PECK Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — Myanmar government troops rounded up villagers, some believed to be children, tied them up and slaughtered them, according to a witness and other reports. An opposition leader said the civilians were burned alive, as repression of resistance to a de facto coup takes an increasingly brutal turn.

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A video of the aftermath of Tuesday's assault — apparent retaliation for an attack on a military convoy — showed the charred bodies of 11 people, lying in a circle amid what appeared to be the remains of a hut.

Outrage spread both inside and outside Myanmar as the graphic images were shared on social media of the assault, which Human Rights Watch said was similar to other recent attacks — and looked like it was meant to be discovered.

"This incident is quite brazen, and it happened in an area that was meant to be found, and seen, to scare people," spokesperson for the group, Manny Maung, said.

"Our contacts are saying these were just boys and young people who were villagers who were caught in the wrong place at the wrong time," she added.

The rights group called Thursday for the international community to ensure that commanders who gave the order are added to targeted sanctions lists, and more broadly, efforts are stepped up to cut off any source of funding to the military, which seized power Feb. 1.

A witness told The Associated Press that about 50 troops marched into the village of Done Taw in the country's northwest at about 11 a.m. Tuesday, seizing anyone who did not manage to flee.

"They arrested 11 innocent villagers," said the witness, who described himself as a farmer and an activist and spoke on condition of anonymity because he fears for his safety.

He did not see the moment of their killing but said he believed they were burned alive, as did other people who spoke to Myanmar media.

He later saw the charred remains — and was present when the images were taken. The images themselves could not be independently verified.

The government has denied that it had any troops in the area.

Opposition spokesperson, Dr. Sasa, said in a statement that the attack bore "witness to the military's escalation of their acts of terror."

"The sheer brutality, savagery, and cruelty of these acts shows a new depth of depravity, and proves that, despite the pretense of the relative détente seen over the last few months, the junta never had any intention of deescalating their campaign of violence," said Sasa, who uses one name and is the spokesperson for Myanmar's underground National Unity Government, which says it is the country's only legitimate administration.

He said a military convoy had been hit by a roadside bomb and troops retaliated first by shelling Done Taw, then rounding up anyone they could capture.

"They were lashed together, tortured, and ultimately burned alive," he said, adding that the victims ranged in age from 14 to 40.

The military ouster of the elected government of democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi was initially met with nonviolent street protests, but after police and soldiers responded with lethal force, violence escalated as opponents of military rule took up arms.

The witness who spoke to the AP said that those captured in Tuesday's attack were not members of the locally organized People's Defense Force, which sometimes engages the army in combat. He said they were as members of a less formally organized village protection group but did not give a reason for the soldiers' assault.

Other witnesses cited in Myanmar media said the victims were members of a defense force.

In recent months, fighting has been raging in northwestern areas, where the army has unleashed greater force against the resistance than in urban centers.

U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric expressed deep concern at the reports of the "horrific killing of 11 people" and strongly condemned such violence, saying "credible reports indicate that five children were among those people killed."

Dujarric reminded Myanmar's military authorities of their obligations under international law to ensure the safety and protection of civilians and called for those responsible "for this heinous act" to be held accountable.

As of Wednesday, he said security forces have killed more than 1,300 unarmed individuals, including more than 75 children, since the military takeover on Feb. 1.

In seizing power, the military claimed there was massive fraud in the 2020 election that saw Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy win in a landslide. The military said that justified the takeover under a constitution that allows it to seize power in emergencies — though independent election observers did not detect any major irregularities.

On Monday, Suu Kyi was convicted on charges of incitement and violating coronavirus restrictions and sentenced to two years in prison. The court's action was widely criticized as a further effort by military rulers to roll back the democratic gains of recent years.

Video dominates as trial starts in Daunte Wright killing

By AMY FORLITI and STEVE KARNOWSKI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Prosecutors building their case against a suburban Minneapolis police officer who killed Black motorist Daunte Wright repeatedly played body-camera video of the fatal shooting, with the officer heard shouting "Taser!" and then collapsing in wails of "Oh my God!" after she had instead fired her handgun.

They used their opening statement Wednesday to portray Kim Potter as a veteran cop who had been repeatedly trained in Taser use, including warnings on avoiding such deadly mix-ups.

Potter's attorney countered that she made an error, saying, "Police officers are human beings." And he cast blame on Wright, saying all the 20-year-old had to do that day was surrender.

Potter, 49, killed Wright, who wasn't armed, during a traffic stop on April 11 in Brooklyn Center. The white officer resigned two days later. She's charged with manslaughter.

Jurors saw video from officers' body cameras and the police car dashboard that showed Potter threatening to shoot Wright with a Taser as another officer tried to pull him out of his car. After she shot him with her gun, Potter can be heard saying, "I just shot him. ... I grabbed the wrong (expletive) gun!"

A car crash can be heard after Wright drives away and Potter — who defense attorney Paul Engh said had never fired her gun or Taser while on duty in her 26-year career — can be heard wailing uncontrollably afterward, "Oh my God. Oh my God!" before she crumples over.

Wright's mother, Katie Bryant, testified about the moment she saw her son lying in his car after he'd been shot. She said she tried to contact him through a video call after losing an earlier phone connection, and a woman — presumably Wright's passenger — answered and screamed, "They shot him!" and pointed the phone toward the driver's seat.

"And my son was laying there. He was unresponsive and he looked dead," Bryant said through tears.

A mostly white jury was seated last week in the case, which sparked angry demonstrations outside the Brooklyn Center police station last spring just as former Minneapolis Officer Derek Chauvin was on trial 10 miles (16 kilometers) away for killing George Floyd.

Engh told jurors that Potter made a mistake when she grabbed the wrong weapon and shot Wright after he attempted to drive away while she and other officers were trying to arrest him.

The charges don't require proof that Potter intended to kill Wright, and prosecutor Erin Eldridge noted as much for the jury.

But Engh also told jurors that Potter would have been justified in shooting Wright even if she had consciously chosen to draw her handgun, arguing that deadly force was warranted to protect her fellow officers. He said police had reason to believe that Wright might have a gun and that one of the officers had reached inside Wright's car and was at risk of being dragged if Wright drove away.

In her opening statement, Eldridge told jurors that Potter violated her extensive training — including on the risks of firing the wrong weapon — and "betrayed a 20-year-old kid."

"This is exactly what she had been trained for years to prevent," Eldridge said. "But on April 11, she betrayed her badge and she failed Daunte Wright."

Potter, who has told the court she will testify, was training a new officer when they pulled Wright over for having expired license plate tags and an air freshener hanging from the rearview mirror.

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The officer Potter was training that day, Anthony Luckey, testified that during the stop, he smelled marijuana and saw marijuana residue on the car's console. He also said Wright didn't have a license and produced an expired proof of insurance that was under another person's name.

After discovering there was a warrant for Wright's arrest on a weapons charge and a restraining order against Wright, Luckey said he was going to put Wright in handcuffs and check on the welfare of the woman in the car, and he asked Wright to get out.

But as Luckey tried to handcuff him, Wright struggled out of the officer's grip and got back into the car. Luckey said he was reaching into the car when he heard the gunshot, and that he then jumped back and saw Wright put the car in drive before it took off.

Prosecutors say Potter had extensive training, and it included an explicit warning about confusing a handgun with a Taser that also directed officers "to learn the differences between their Taser and firearm to avoid such confusion."

Eldridge told jurors that officers are required to carry their Taser on their nondominant side and their firearm on their dominant side. Potter carried her gun on her right and her Taser on her left, where it was in a "straight draw" position to be drawn with that left hand.

"The only weapon she draws with her right hand is her gun, not her Taser," Eldridge said.

The most serious charge against Potter requires prosecutors to prove recklessness, while the lesser requires them to prove culpable negligence. Minnesota's sentencing guidelines call for a prison term of just over seven years on the first-degree manslaughter count and four years on the second-degree one. Prosecutors have said they will seek a longer sentence.

Associated Press writers Tammy Webber in Fenton, Michigan, and Mohamed Ibrahim in Minneapolis contributed.

Find the AP's full coverage of the Daunte Wright case: <https://apnews.com/hub/death-of-daunte-wright>

China dismisses UK, Canada Olympic boycott as 'farce'

BEIJING (AP) — China on Thursday dismissed the decision by Canada and the United Kingdom to join Washington's diplomatic boycott of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympic Games as a "farce."

China is also unconcerned the officials' absence would spark a chain reaction, while numerous heads of state, government leaders and members of royal families have registered to attend, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin told reporters at a daily briefing.

The three countries have said they won't send government dignitaries to the Games that run Feb. 4-20 to protest human rights abuses in China, while New Zealand said it informed Beijing earlier that it wouldn't be sending any officials due to pandemic travel restrictions but had also communicated its human rights concerns.

Under the diplomatic boycott, the countries will still send their athletes to compete.

Wang said China had not extended invitations to the U.S., Canada or the U.K. and that it "doesn't matter if their officials come or not, they will see the success of the Beijing Winter Olympics."

"Sports has nothing to do with politics," Wang said. "It is they who have written, directed and performed this farce."

China is not only confident there will be no chain reaction, but perceives overwhelming global support for the Games, he said.

"As of now, numerous heads of state, leaders of government and royal family members have registered to attend the Beijing Winter Olympics, and we welcome them," Wang said. "China is committed to making greater contributions to the international Olympic cause and will offer up a streamlined, safe and exciting Olympics to the world."

China has vowed to respond to the U.S. with "firm countermeasures" over the boycott, but has given no details on how it plans to retaliate.

Rights groups have called for a total boycott of the Beijing Winter Games, citing Chinese human rights abuses against its Uyghur minority in the northwest Xinjiang region, which some have called genocide. They also point to Beijing's suppression of democratic protests in Hong Kong and a sweeping crackdown on dissent in the semi-autonomous territory.

Canada's move came as little surprise in the context of the sharp deterioration in bilateral ties since China arrested two Canadians in Dec. 2018, shortly after Canada arrested Meng Wanzhou, Huawei Technologies' chief financial officer and the daughter of the company's founder, on a U.S. extradition request.

Canada and others condemned what they called "hostage politics," while China described the charges against Huawei and Meng as a politically motivated attempt to hold back China's economic and technological development.

China, the U.S. and Canada completed what was essentially a high-stakes prisoner swap earlier this year, but the Chinese government's reputation has been severely tarnished in Canada.

New Zealand's plan to end smoking: A lifetime ban for youth

By NICK PERRY Associated Press

WELLINGTON, New Zealand (AP) — New Zealand's government believes it has come up with a unique plan to end tobacco smoking — a lifetime ban for those aged 14 or younger.

Under a new law the government announced Thursday and plans to pass next year, the minimum age to buy cigarettes would keep rising year after year.

That means, in theory at least, 65 years after the law takes effect, shoppers could still buy cigarettes — but only if they could prove they were at least 80 years old.

In practice, officials hope smoking will fade away decades before then. Indeed, the plan sets a goal of having fewer than 5% of New Zealanders smoking by 2025.

Other parts of the plan include allowing only the sale of tobacco products with very low nicotine levels and slashing the number of stores that can sell them. The changes would be brought in over time to help retailers adjust.

Because the current minimum age to buy cigarettes in New Zealand is 18, the lifetime smoking ban for youth wouldn't have an impact for a few years.

In an interview with The Associated Press, New Zealand's Associate Health Minister Dr. Ayesha Verrall, who is spearheading the plan, said her work at a public hospital in Wellington involved telling several smokers they had developed cancer.

"You meet, every day, someone facing the misery caused by tobacco," Verrall said. "The most horrible ways people die. Being short of breath, caused by tobacco."

Smoking rates have steadily fallen in New Zealand for years, with only about 11% of adults now smoking and 9% smoking every day. The daily rate among Indigenous Maori remains much higher at 22%. Under the government's plan, a taskforce would be created to help reduce smoking among Maori.

Big tax increases have already been imposed on cigarettes in recent years and some question why they aren't hiked even higher.

"We don't think tax increases will have any further impact," Verrall said. "It's really hard to quit and we feel if we did that, we'd be punishing those people who are addicted to cigarettes even more."

And she said the tax measures tend to place a higher burden on lower-income people, who are more likely to smoke.

The new law wouldn't impact vaping. Verrall said that tobacco smoking is far more harmful and remains a leading cause of preventable deaths in New Zealand, killing up to 5,000 people each year.

"We think vaping's a really appropriate quit tool," she said.

The sale of vaping products is already restricted to those aged 18 and over in New Zealand and vaping is banned in schools. Verrall said there was some evidence of a rise in youth vaping, a trend she is following "really closely."

New Zealand's approach to ban the next generation from tobacco smoking hasn't been tried elsewhere,

she said.

But she said studies have shown youth sales decrease when minimum ages are raised. In the U.S., the federal minimum age to buy tobacco products was raised from 18 to 21 two years ago.

While public health experts have generally welcomed the New Zealand plan, not everybody is happy.

Sunny Kaushal said some stores could be put out of business. Kaushal chairs the Dairy and Business Owners Group, which represents nearly 5,000 corner stores — often called dairies in New Zealand — and gas stations.

“We all want a smoke-free New Zealand,” he said. “But this is going to hugely impact small businesses. It should not be done so it is destroying dairies, lives and families in the process. It’s not the way.”

Kaushal said the tax increases on tobacco had already created a black market that was being exploited by gangs, and the problem would only get worse. He said smoking was already in its twilight in New Zealand and would die away of its own accord.

“This is being driven by academics,” he said, adding that stakeholders hadn’t been consulted.

But Verrall said she didn’t believe the government was overreaching because statistics showed the vast majority of smokers wanted to quit anyway, and the new policies would only help them achieve their goal.

She said the pandemic had helped people gain a new appreciation for the benefits of public health measures and rallying communities, and that perhaps that energy could be harnessed not only to tackle smoking but also diseases like diabetes.

Verrall said she had never smoked herself but her late grandmother did, and it likely compromised her health.

“It’s a really cruel product,” Verrall said.

Ukraine spa town stands out amid nation’s vaccine hesitancy

By OLEKSANDR STASHEVSKYI and YURAS KARMANAU Associated Press

MORSHYN, Ukraine (AP) — A small spa town in western Ukraine is standing out in a European country where only 29% of the people have received COVID-19 vaccine shots, and locals credit their community spirit for fending off the worst of the pandemic.

In Morshyn, a scenic town nestled at the Carpathian foothills in the Lviv region, 74% of its 3,439 residents had been fully vaccinated as of late November.

While Ukrainian authorities have imposed new restrictions amid a surge of infections and deaths blamed on a slow pace of vaccination and designated the region around Morshyn as a “red zone” where most public places have been shut down, the wellness centers in Morshyn have remained fully open.

Morshyn’s mineral water has made it a European attraction since the 19th century, when it was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Over 2,800 of its residents are currently employed by 10 different spas, which only accept guests with certificates proving vaccination, recovery from a past COVID-19 illness or a negative test.

“I was making plans to travel somewhere this year and I chose Morshyn when I learned that many people here were vaccinated,” said Valentyna Panchuk, a retiree visiting the town.

A united, broad-based approach seems to be going a long way in protecting the residents of Morshyn. Locals have embraced a host of public health measures that have proven effective against the spread of the disease: they wear masks, observe social distancing and vaccine uptake is high. The town’s low density also helps too — with houses spread out amid parks and squares.

All these factors work toward the goal of keeping the town humming and people working.

“After mass vaccinations in Morshyn, there have been no gravely ill coronavirus patients there anymore,” said Ukrainian Health Minister Viktor Lyashko. “There was a report about just one hospitalization, and that person wasn’t vaccinated.”

Morshyn, which hasn’t seen any COVID-19 deaths over the past six months, has been touted by Ukrainian officials as a model for the rest of the country.

Four coronavirus vaccines are available in Ukraine — Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna, AstraZeneca and Sino-

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vac — but only 29% of its 41 million people are fully vaccinated. The Ministry of Health reports that 96% of patients with severe COVID-19 weren't immunized.

Doctors blame the public hesitancy in Ukraine on a distrust of government and on vaccine falsehoods about shots containing microchips or causing infertility. They say residents in Morshyn do get infected with COVID-19, but those who are vaccinated have mild cases that don't require hospitalization.

"Not just immunization of two-thirds of the population, but long distances allow people to not get infected," said Dr. Gennady Yukshinsky, chief doctor of Morshyn's hospital. "Testing is widespread, and if a COVID-19 infection is detected, the (infected) person voluntarily self-isolates, understanding the responsibility to other residents."

According to Yukshinsky, there were 14 active COVID-19 cases in Morshyn as of late November, all of them mild.

The Ukrainian government has required teachers, doctors, government employees and other workers to be fully vaccinated by Dec. 1. It has also begun to require proof of vaccination or a negative COVID-19 test for travel on planes, trains and long-distance buses.

The decision has sparked protests in the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv, where thousands have rallied to protest the restrictions.

In Morshyn, the mass vaccinations have saved its residents from potentially losing their jobs amid the autumn surge of new infections.

Morshyn Mayor Ruslan Ilnytsky was among the first to get a vaccine. He said during a nationwide lockdown in the spring, the town sustained a heavy economic blow when all of its spas were shut down. He said he realized then that Morshyn would probably not survive another lockdown and spearheaded a vaccination campaign last summer in anticipation of a new surge of infections as cold weather forced people indoors.

"We initiated a pilot project for simultaneous immunization of the entire adult population," Ilnytsky told The Associated Press. "Family doctors were calling residents, personally inviting them to get the vaccine and offering assurances of safety. I think it played a big role."

Yukshinsky, the Morshyn hospital chief, also emphasized the importance of the personalized approach, adding that "it had a big effect, and people got immunized en masse."

That sharply differs from the rest of Ukraine.

A nationwide survey conducted last month by the Rating polling firm showed that 43% of respondents don't want to get vaccinated. The poll of 2,500 had a margin of error of no more than 2 percentage points.

Murat Sahin, UNICEF representative in Ukraine, said that fake theories about COVID-19 are posing a growing threat to the country's collective health during the pandemic.

"The risks of misinformation about vaccinations have never been higher — nor have the stakes," Sahin said. "This is why in 2021 we need a stronger and more robust effort to address rumors, fake news and misinformation than ever."

Karmanau reported from Kyiv, Ukraine. Yefrem Lukatsky in Morshyn, Ukraine, contributed to this report.

Follow all AP stories on the pandemic at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>.

From grime to crumbling masonry, US parks get a makeover

By REBECCA REYNOLDS Associated Press

Near the Tidal Basin in Washington, crews have cleaned grime off the white marble exterior of the Jefferson Memorial and fixed cracked stone to prevent falling debris. At the Statue of Liberty, plans are in the works to waterproof the exterior of the massive stone fort built in 1807 that serves as the monument's base.

And at New River Gorge in West Virginia, one of the newest national parks, historical masonry grills have been restored near the Grandview Visitor Center, which features a breathtaking overlook of the

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valley and waterway 1,400 feet (430 meters) below.

Under legislation passed by Congress in 2020, some of America's most spectacular natural settings and historical icons, from the monuments of the East Coast to the Grand Canyon and Yosemite in the West, are getting a makeover.

The Great American Outdoor Act dedicates up to \$1.6 billion a year for the next five years to extensive maintenance and repairs that have been put off time and time again. The funding will go toward critical projects in national parks, forests, wildlife refuges and recreation areas, according to the Department of the Interior. It also includes funding for tribal schools.

Some of the first projects being funded are smaller ones that will preserve historical structures like the grills at New River Gorge and the marble walls of the Jefferson Memorial. But dozens of other projects are coming, some more urgent than others.

In Puerto Rico, plans call for stabilizing a cliffside eroded by wind, rain and waves at San Juan National Historic Site to stop rocks from falling on a popular recreation trail below.

Another project will repair the failing left abutment of a 146-year-old masonry dam on the Potomac River at the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park "to prevent possible loss of life" from a sudden release of water.

At the Grand Canyon, a massive Swiss chalet-style building with oversized balconies, windows and eaves is in line for an upgrade that will bring the now-vacant structure up to code and stabilize it while the park determines how best to use it.

Some of the projects planned for the next year will fix problems with infrastructure that park visitors might not immediately notice: repaving roads, repairing leaky lodge roofs and replacing outdated utilities that pose safety risks.

One such project will replace dilapidated high-voltage transmission lines and towers at Yosemite National Park. The lines constructed in the mid-1930s provide power to the entire Yosemite Valley.

Several campgrounds will see improvements, including one in the Rocky Mountains that will get new utility lines to provide consistent clean water and power as well more electric hookups and parking.

"The Great American Outdoors Act overall, with the amount of funding available, offers us really a once in a generation opportunity to take care of some of the large projects, the large needs, of the national park service," while also addressing several critical smaller projects, said Mike Caldwell, National Park Service acting associate director of park planning, facilities and lands.

New River Gorge, where one of the first maintenance projects was completed in October, attracted about 70,000 visitors annually before being designated a national park last year. Attendance has increased with the new status, especially at Grandview, a popular place for hiking, picnics and taking in the dramatic landscape, spokeswoman Eve West said.

"It's one of the prettiest areas in the park. It's 1,400 feet from the very top down to the river so you get some phenomenal views of the park looking out from the main overlook," West said.

Masonry hearths built in the 1930s in Grandview's picnic area had deteriorated in the elements, and the grills sat mostly unused until September when crews arrived to make repairs.

Crews replaced the brick and mortar and installed new grates, said Moira Gasior, historic preservation steward at New River Gorge. Gasior worked to help obtain \$280,000 in funding for the project, which included repairs to a large fireplace in a picnic shelter built by the Civilian Conservation Corp before World War II.

At the Jefferson Memorial, the \$3.8 million project to clean and restore the structure below its dome wrapped up in late October after several months of work to clean grime that had spread over the white marble, making it darker — even black in places — said Mike Litterst, spokesman for the National Mall.

"The Jefferson Memorial certainly had had a deteriorating appearance over last several years due to the biofilm, and the cleaning has restored it to the bright white that people expect and, to be perfectly honest, Thomas Jefferson deserves," Litterst said.

In the coming years, several other high priority projects are slated for funding, including a new water line at the Grand Canyon that serves more than 6 million visitors and year-round residents.

Grand Canyon spokeswoman Joelle Baird said the park expects funding in fiscal year 2023 for the pipeline that has broken more than 85 times in the past 10 years, leading to costly repairs that require supplies and workers to be flown in by helicopter.

The cost to replace the line, which is decades beyond its life expectancy, easily tops \$100 million, Baird said.

"It's going to be a very large undertaking but ultimately is going to have huge benefits to the infrastructure and water delivery to the entire park," she said.

Associated Press writer Felicia Fonseca in Flagstaff, Arizona, contributed to this report.

Vaccine makers racing to update COVID shots, just in case

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

Vaccine makers are racing to update their COVID-19 shots against the newest coronavirus threat even before it's clear a change is needed, just in case.

Experts doubt today's shots will become useless but say it's critical to see how fast companies could produce a reformulated dose and prove it works -- because whatever happens with omicron, this newest mutant won't be the last.

Omicron "is pulling the fire alarm. Whether it turns out to be a false alarm, it would be really good to know if we can actually do this -- get a new vaccine rolled out and be ready," said immunologist E. John Wherry of the University of Pennsylvania.

It's too soon to know how vaccines will hold up against omicron. The first hints this week were mixed: Preliminary lab tests suggest two Pfizer doses may not prevent an omicron infection but they could protect against severe illness. And a booster shot may rev up immunity enough to do both.

Better answers are expected in the coming weeks and regulators in the U.S. and other countries are keeping a close watch. The World Health Organization has appointed an independent scientific panel to advise on whether the shots need reformulating because of omicron or any other mutant.

But authorities haven't laid out what would trigger such a drastic step: If vaccine immunity against serious illness drops, or if a new mutant merely spreads faster?

"This is not trivial," BioNTech CEO Ugur Sahin, Pfizer's vaccine partner, said shortly before omicron's discovery. A company could apply to market a new formula "but what happens if another company makes another proposal with another variant? We don't have an agreed strategy."

It's a tough decision — and the virus moves faster than science. Just this fall the U.S. government's vaccine advisers wondered why boosters weren't retooled to target the extra-contagious delta variant — only to have the next scary mutant, omicron, be neither a delta descendent nor a very close cousin.

If vaccines do need tweaking, there's still another question: Should there be a separate omicron booster or a combination shot? And if it's a combo, should it target the original strain along with omicron, or the currently dominant delta variant plus omicron? Here's what we know.

COMPANIES AREN'T STARTING FROM SCRATCH

COVID-19 vaccines work by triggering production of antibodies that recognize and attack the spike protein that coats the coronavirus, and many are made with new technology flexible enough for easy updating. The Pfizer and Moderna vaccines are fastest to tweak, made with genetic instructions that tell the body to make harmless copies of the spike protein — and that messenger RNA can be swapped to match new mutations.

Pfizer expects to have an omicron-specific candidate ready for the Food and Drug Administration to consider in March, with some initial batches ready to ship around the same time, chief scientific officer Dr. Mikael Dolsten told The Associated Press.

Moderna is predicting 60 to 90 days to have an omicron-specific candidate ready for testing. Other manufacturers that make COVID-19 vaccines using different technology, including Johnson & Johnson, also are pursuing possible updates.

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Pfizer and Moderna already have successfully brewed experimental doses to match delta and another variant named beta, shots that haven't been needed but offered valuable practice.

NOT CLEAR IF TWEAKS ARE NEEDED

So far, the original vaccines have offered at least some cross-protection against prior variants. Even if immunity against omicron isn't as good, Dr. Anthony Fauci, the top U.S. infectious disease expert, hopes the big antibody jump triggered by booster doses will compensate.

Pfizer's preliminary lab testing, released Wednesday, hint that might be the case but antibodies aren't the only layer of defense. Vaccines also spur T cells that can prevent serious illness if someone does get infected, and Pfizer's first tests showed, as expected, those don't seem to be affected by omicron.

Also, memory cells that can create new and somewhat different antibodies form with each dose.

"You're really training your immune system not just to deal better with existing variants, but it actually prepares a broader repertoire to deal with new variants," Dolsten said.

How aggressive a mutant is also plays a role in whether to reformulate the vaccine. Omicron appears to spread easily but early reports from South African scientists hint that it might cause milder infections than previous variants.

HOW TO TELL IF UPDATES WORK

The FDA has said companies won't need massive studies of tweaked vaccines but small ones to measure if people given the updated shot have immune responses comparable to the original, highly effective shots.

Wherry doesn't expect data from volunteers testing experimental omicron-targeted shots until at least February.

WHAT ABOUT COMBINATION SHOTS?

Flu vaccines protect against three or four different strains of influenza in one shot. If a vaccine tweak is needed for omicron, authorities will have to decide to whether to make a separate omicron booster or add it to the original vaccine -- or maybe even follow the flu model and try another combination.

There's some evidence that a COVID-19 combo shot could work. In a small Moderna study, a so-called bivalent booster containing the original vaccine and a beta-specific dose caused a bigger antibody jump than either an original Moderna booster or its experimental beta-specific shot.

And scientists already are working on next-generation vaccines that target parts of the virus less prone to mutate.

Omicron brings "another important wake-up call," Wherry said -- not just to vaccinate the world but create more versatile options to get that job done.

AP reporter Jamey Keaten contributed to this report.

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Darwin in a lab: Coral evolution tweaked for global warming

By CALEB JONES Associated Press

COCONUT ISLAND, Hawaii (AP) — On a moonless summer night in Hawaii, krill, fish and crabs swirl through a beam of light as two researchers peer into the water above a vibrant reef.

Minutes later, like clockwork, they see eggs and sperm from spawning coral drifting past their boat. They scoop up the fishy-smelling blobs and put them in test tubes.

In this Darwinian experiment, the scientists are trying to speed up coral's evolutionary clock to breed "super corals" that can better withstand the impacts of global warming.

For the past five years, the researchers have been conducting experiments to prove their theories would work. Now, they're getting ready to plant laboratory-raised corals in the ocean to see how they survive in Nature.

"Assisted evolution started out as this kind of crazy idea that you could actually help something change

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and allow that to survive better because it is changing," said Kira Hughes, a University of Hawaii researcher and the project's manager.

SPEEDING UP NATURE

Researchers tested three methods of making corals more resilient:

- Selective breeding that carries on desirable traits from parents.
- Acclimation that conditions corals to tolerate heat by exposing them to increasing temperatures.
- And modifying the algae that give corals essential nutrients.

Hughes said the methods all have proven successful in the lab.

And while some other scientists worried this is meddling with Nature, Hughes said the rapidly warming planet leaves no other options. "We have to intervene in order to make a change for coral reefs to survive into the future," she said.

When ocean temperatures rise, coral releases its symbiotic algae that supply nutrients and impart its vibrant colors. The coral turns white — a process called bleaching — and can quickly become sick and die.

For more than a decade, scientists have been observing corals that have survived bleaching, even when others have died on the same reef.

So, researchers are focusing on those hardy survivors, hoping to enhance their heat tolerance. And they found selective breeding held the most promise for Hawaii's reefs.

"Corals are threatened worldwide by a lot of stressors, but increasing temperatures are probably the most severe," said Crawford Drury, chief scientist at Hawaii's Coral Resilience Lab. "And so that's what our focus is on, working with parents that are really thermally tolerant."

A NOVEL IDEA

In 2015, Ruth Gates, who launched the resilience lab, and Madeleine van Oppen of the Australian Institute of Marine Science published a paper on assisted evolution during one of the world's worst bleaching events.

The scientists proposed bringing corals into a lab to help them evolve into more heat-tolerant animals. And the idea attracted Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen, who funded the first phase of research and whose foundation still supports the program.

"We've given (coral) experiences that we think are going to raise their ability to survive," Gates told The Associated Press in a 2015 interview.

Gates, who died of brain cancer in 2018, also said she wanted people to know how "intimately reef health is intertwined with human health."

Coral reefs, often called the rainforests of the sea, provide food for humans and marine animals, shore-line protection for coastal communities, jobs for tourist economies and even medicine to treat illnesses such as cancer, arthritis and Alzheimers disease.

A recent report from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and other research organizations concluded bleaching events are the biggest threat to the world's coral reefs. Scientists found that between 2009 and 2018, the world lost about 14% of its coral.

Assisted evolution was not widely accepted when first proposed.

Van Oppen said there were concerns about losing genetic diversity and critics who said the scientists were "playing gods" by tampering with the reef.

"Well, you know, (humans) have already intervened with the reef for very long periods of time," van Oppen said. "All we're trying to do is to repair the damage."

Rather than editing genes or creating anything unnatural, researchers are just nudging what could already happen in the ocean, she said. "We are really focusing first on as local a scale as possible to try and maintain and enhance what is already there."

MILLIONS OF YEARS IN THE MAKING

Still, there are lingering questions.

"We have discovered lots of reasons why corals don't bleach," said Steve Palumbi, a marine biologist and professor at Stanford University. "Just because you find a coral that isn't bleaching in the field or in the lab doesn't mean it's permanently heat tolerant."

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Corals have been on Earth for about 250 million years and their genetic code is not fully understood. "This is not the first time any coral on the entire planet has ever been exposed to heat," Palumbi said. "So the fact that all corals are not heat resistant tells you ... that there's some disadvantage to it. And if there weren't a disadvantage, they'd all be heat resistant."

But Palumbi thinks the assisted evolution work has a valuable place in coral management plans because "reefs all over the world are in desperate, desperate, desperate trouble."

The project has gained broad support and spurred research around the world. Scientists in the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, Germany and elsewhere are doing their own coral resilience work. The U.S. government also backs the effort.

Assisted evolution "is really impressive and very consistent with a study that we conducted with the National Academies of Sciences," said Jennifer Koss, the director of NOAA's Coral Reef Conservation Program.

"We asked them to gather all the most recent cutting-edge science that was really centered on innovative interventions in coral reef management," Koss said. "And certainly, this assisted gene flow fits right in."

MAJOR HURDLES

There are still serious challenges.

Scalability is one. Getting lab-bred corals out into the ocean and having them survive will be hard, especially since reintroduction has to happen on a local level to avoid bringing detrimental biological material from one region to another.

James Guest, a coral ecologist in the United Kingdom, leads a project to show selectively bred corals not only survive longer in warmer water, but can also be successfully reintroduced on a large scale.

"It's great if we can do all this stuff in the lab, but we have to show that we can get very large numbers of them out onto the reef in a cost-effective way," Guest said.

Scientists are testing delivery methods, such as using ships to pump young corals into the ocean and deploying small underwater robots to plant coral.

No one is proposing assisted evolution alone will save the world's reefs. The idea is part of a suite of measures – with proposals ranging from creating shades for coral to pumping cooler deep-ocean water onto reefs that get too warm.

The advantage of planting stronger corals is that after a generation or two, they should spread their traits naturally, without much human intervention.

Over the next several years, the Hawaii scientists will place selectively bred coral back into Kaneohe Bay and observe their behavior. Van Oppen and her colleagues have already put some corals with modified symbiotic algae back on the Great Barrier Reef.

With the world's oceans continuing to warm, scientists say they are up against the clock to save reefs.

"All the work we are going to do here," said Hawaii's Drury, "is not going to make a difference if we don't wind up addressing climate change on a global, systematic scale."

"So really, what we're trying to do is buy time."

Follow Caleb Jones on Twitter: @CalebAP

Analysis: As US focus wanes, Mideast turns inward for talks

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — After years of looking abroad for answers, countries in the Middle East now appear to instead be talking to each other to find solutions following two decades defined by war and political upheaval.

The American withdrawals from Afghanistan and Iraq have played a part in that change. Once ostracized autocracies such as President Bashar Assad in Syria, and shunned former top figures such as Moammar Gadhafi's son in Libya, are back in the political arena amid the still smoldering ruins of the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings.

Much remains unsettled and this inward search may not provide the answers most want. There are no

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quick fixes to Lebanon's unprecedented economic free-fall, the plight of Afghans desperate to flee the country's new Taliban rulers and Iran's increasingly hard-line stance over its nuclear program.

But the diplomatic maneuvering signals a growing realization across the region that America's interest is moving elsewhere and that now is the time for negotiations that were unthinkable just a year ago.

The United States still maintains a strong military presence, including bases across the wider Mideast. Tens of thousands of American troops operate tanks in Kuwait, sail through the Strait of Hormuz and fly missions across the Arabian Peninsula.

But its Arab allies also watched in stunned horror as desperate people clung to the sides of departing U.S. military cargo jets during America's chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan after 20 years of war and the Taliban takeover of the country. Decisions by both the Trump and Biden administrations led to that moment — and upended strategic thinking calcified by the Cold War and the conflicts that followed the Sept. 11 attacks.

American analysts now talk about the "great powers" competition and point at Russia's buildup of forces on Ukraine's borders and China's posture toward Taiwan. Those flashpoints, they say, need some of the personnel and equipment long stationed in the Mideast.

Meanwhile, talks in Vienna aimed at restoring Iran's nuclear deal with world powers appear to be floundering. With Iran's uranium enrichment at levels never seen before, threats of military action by Israel have rekindled tensions and fears that an ongoing shadow war in could escalate into open conflict.

And with the border-locking chaos of the coronavirus pandemic largely behind them, Mideast leaders are now shuffling, talking face-to-face amid a flurry of diplomatic meetings, seemingly eager to hedge their bets.

The United Arab Emirates sent its national security adviser on a rare trip to speak to Iran's hard-line president, likely hoping to head off any other maritime attacks off its coast. Saudi Arabia, which cut off ties to Iran in 2016 following attacks on their diplomatic posts sparked by the kingdom's execution of a prominent Shiite cleric, also has held talks with Tehran, hosted in Baghdad.

It's not just about Iran, however. An intra-Gulf feud that saw Qatar boycotted for years by four Arab countries ended in January. Years of recriminations gave way to an image of Qatar's ruling emir, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and the Emirati national security adviser, photographed smiling and relaxed, standing next to each other in board shorts.

Later in December, the Gulf Cooperation Council, which also includes Bahrain, Kuwait and Oman, is to hold its first non-fractious meeting since the boycott. Prince Mohammed has embarked on a tour of the GCC states ahead of that summit, hoping to reassert his own influence after U.S. intelligence agencies said he likely approved the killing and dismemberment of Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018.

While each of the Gulf Arab states conducts its own diplomacy, a unified GCC front could prove valuable if tensions rise further with Iran. There are also considerations farther afield. Turkey, long viewed with suspicion by the Emirates and Egypt over offering a haven to Islamists, has sought warmer ties as it tries to halt the collapse of its currency, the lira.

The closing of ranks also brought a return of realpolitik to the region, a decade after the Arab Spring movements that aimed to topple the region's autocrats.

Syria's Assad has clawed his way back from the precipice. Though the northwestern Syrian province of Idlib remains under the control of opposition forces, Assad controls the rest of the country. Now, he is slowly being brought back into the fold of the same Arab countries that once called for his ouster — even if America maintains both its opposition to his rule and a small troop presence in the country's east, near the border with Iraq.

Another figure back on the scene is Seif al-Islam Gadhafi, the son of Libya's slain dictator. Though still wanted by the International Criminal Court over the killing of Arab Spring protesters, Seif al-Islam has reemerged as a candidate in the country's upcoming presidential election.

In Tunisia, which saw the first of the Arab Spring's protests, President Kais Saied froze the country's parliament and seized executive powers in July. That sidelined the country's Islamists in a move criticized

by opponents as a coup.

And in Sudan, where a popular uprising and coup toppled longtime autocrat Omar al-Bashir in 2019, another recent coup disrupted fragile plans for a transition to democracy.

This new Mideast reassessment however, appears to have limits on what it can resolve.

The Mideast hasn't rushed to embrace Taliban rule in Afghanistan and international recognition is still far off. The grinding civil war rages on in Yemen, where a Saudi-led coalition battles Iranian-backed rebels. In Lebanon, the Iran-Saudi rivalry threatens to tear the country apart even more as it faces what the World Bank described as the world's worst financial crisis in 150 years.

But the talking, for now, continues. And absent a major crisis that could draw America in again, those conversations likely will be where the deals get done.

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

An Afghan village shrivels in worst drought in decades

By MISTYSLAV CHERNOV Associated Press

KAMAR KALAGH, Afghanistan (AP) — Hajji Wali Jan brought a half-dozen plastic containers to the well in Kamar Kalagh on a recent Friday — one of the handful of days each week he and those who live on his side of this Afghan village are allowed to use the water source.

When it was finally his turn, the 66-year-old filled one container, then a second. The stream of water from the spigot got thinner. He started on another container — but the thread of water tapered away and then stopped before the vessel was full.

The well was done for the day.

Afghanistan's drought, its worst in decades, is now entering its second year, exacerbated by climate change. The dry spell has hit 25 of the country's 34 provinces, and this year's wheat harvest is estimated to be down 20% from the year before.

Along with fighting, the drought has contributed to driving more than 700,000 people from their homes this year, and the onset of winter will only increase the potential for disaster.

"This cumulative drought impact on already debilitated communities can be yet another tipping point to catastrophe," the U.N. Food and Agricultural Organization's Afghanistan office said in a tweet Tuesday. "If left unattended, agriculture might collapse."

U.N. experts blamed a late 2020 La Nina event, which can change weather patterns across the globe, for causing lower rain and snowfall in early 2021 in Afghanistan, and they predict that it will continue into 2022.

Afghanistan has long seen regular droughts. But in a 2019 report, the FAO warned that climate change could make them more frequent and more intense. The past year's drought came on the heels of one in 2018 that at the time was the worst seen in Afghanistan in years.

In the midst of the drought, Afghanistan's economy collapsed in the wake of the August takeover by the Taliban that resulted in a shut-off of international funds to the government and the freezing of billions of the country's assets held abroad.

Jobs and livelihoods have disappeared, leaving families desperate for ways to find food. The FAO said last month that 18.8 million Afghans are unable to feed themselves every day, and by the end of the year that number will be 23 million, or nearly 60% of the population.

Already hit hard by the drought of 2018, small villages like Kamar Kalagh are shriveling away, unable to squeeze out enough water to survive.

A collection of mud brick homes in the mountains outside the western city of Herat, Kamar Kalagh is home to about 150 families who used to live off of their livestock, particularly camels and goats, and the salaries of men who worked as porters at the Islam Qala border crossing with Iran.

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That work has largely dried up as well, and now the village's main income is from selling sand.

Ajab Gul and his two young sons dug sand from the riverbed and stuffed it into bags on a recent day. A full day's work will earn them the equivalent of about \$2.

"The grass used to grow up to here," Gul said, holding his hand up to his nose. "When a camel walked through it, you'd just see his head. That was 20 years ago."

Now there's no grass and almost no livestock.

Two years ago, the village's main well ran dry, so the residents pooled the money to pay for it to be dug deeper. For a while, it worked. But soon it grew weak again. The villagers began a rationing system: Half could draw water one day, the other half the next.

Even rationing is no longer enough. The water from the well is only enough for about 10 families a day, Wali Jan said.

When Wali Jan couldn't fill his canisters, he sent two of his grandsons to an alternative source. They turned the chore into a game: The older boy, about 9, pushed the wheelbarrow, with his younger brother riding alongside the canisters, laughing.

They went up the hill, down the other side, through another dry riverbed — about 3 kilometers (2 miles) in all. Plodding along in hand-me-down tennis shoes too big for his feet, the older boy tripped, and the wheelbarrow tumbled over. Still, they made it to a pool of stagnant water in the riverbed, its surface covered in green algae. They filled the canisters.

When they got back to the village, their grandfather met them. He unwound his turban and tied one end of the long scarf around a handle on the front of the wheelbarrow to help the boys get it up the last slope to his family's home.

The elderly and the very young are nearly the only males remaining in the village. Most of the working-age men have left to find jobs, elsewhere in Afghanistan, in Iran, Pakistan or Turkey.

"You don't find anyone outside during the day anymore," said Samar Gul, another man in his 60s. "There's only women and children inside the houses."

Meadows sues as Jan. 6 panel proceeds with contempt case

By MARY CLARE JALONICK and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Former Trump White House chief of staff Mark Meadows on Wednesday sued the House committee investigating the Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection as the chairman of the panel pledged to move forward with contempt charges against him for defying a subpoena.

The dueling actions laid bare simmering tensions between the committee and Meadows, seen by lawmakers on the panel as a pivotal player in their investigation, and reflected a remarkable turnabout from last week, when Meadows' lawyer had declared his intention of cooperating with the committee on certain areas of their inquiry.

Meadows' lawsuit, filed in federal court in Washington, asks a judge to invalidate two subpoenas that he says are "overly broad and unduly burdensome." It accuses the committee of overreaching by issuing a subpoena to Verizon for his cell phone records.

"Allowing an entirely partisan select committee of Congress to subpoena the personal cell phone data of executive officials would work a massive chilling of current and future Executive Branch officials' associational and free speech rights," the lawsuit states.

The complaint was filed hours after Democratic Rep. Bennie Thompson, the committee chairman, declared he had "no choice" but to proceed with contempt charges against Meadows, who was subpoenaed more than two months ago and did not show up Wednesday for a scheduled deposition. Meadows' lawyer, George Terwilliger, told the committee on Tuesday that his client was ending his cooperation.

In a letter responding to Terwilliger, Thompson noted that Meadows has already provided documents to the committee, including personal emails and texts about President Donald Trump's efforts to overturn his 2020 election defeat, and has also published a book, released this week, that discusses the Jan. 6 attack.

"That he would sell his telling of the facts of that day while denying a congressional committee the

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opportunity to ask him about the attack on our Capitol marks an historic and aggressive defiance of Congress," Thompson wrote.

The move to hold Meadows in contempt comes as the committee has struggled to gain compliance from a few of the former president's closest and most high-profile allies. Still, the panel has already conducted more than 250 interviews with witnesses as they attempt to compile the most comprehensive record yet of the brutal siege.

In a statement late Wednesday, Thompson and the committee's Republican vice chairwoman, Wyoming Rep. Liz Cheney, said the panel will meet next week to vote on advancing criminal contempt charges against Meadows.

"Mr. Meadows's flawed lawsuit won't succeed at slowing down the Select Committee's investigation or stopping us from getting the information we're seeking," the two lawmakers said.

Committee leaders have said they intend to punish anyone who will not comply with the probe, and the House has already voted to hold longtime Trump ally Steve Bannon in contempt after he defied their subpoena. The Justice Department later indicted Bannon on two counts.

In his letter to Terwilliger, Thompson summarized a handful of the thousands of documents that Meadows has already provided, including communications that involve White House efforts to overturn Joe Biden's election victory. Meadows provided the committee last month with personal emails and backed-up data from his personal cellphone, including text messages, Thompson said.

He said the documents Meadows turned over included an email dated Nov. 7, 2020 — the day Biden was declared the White House winner — that Thompson described as "discussing the appointment of alternate slates of electors as part of a 'direct and collateral attack' after the election." Thompson did not say who sent the email or give further details.

Thompson also described an email that referenced a 38-page PowerPoint presentation titled "Election Fraud, Foreign Interference & Options for 6 JAN" that Thompson said was intended to be shared on Capitol Hill. Thompson did not further elaborate on the email but said it was dated Jan. 5, 2021, the day before hundreds of Trump's supporters violently breached the Capitol and interrupted the certification of Biden's victory.

A separate Nov. 6, 2020, text exchange between Meadows and an unidentified member of Congress, Thompson wrote, was "apparently about appointing alternate electors in certain states as part of a plan that the member acknowledged would be 'highly controversial,' and to which Mr. Meadows apparently said, 'I love it.'"

Also included in the documents, according to Thompson: a Jan. 5, 2021, email about having the National Guard on standby the next day; an "early 2021 text message exchange" between Meadows and an organizer of the rally held the morning of Jan. 6, when Trump told his supporters to "fight like hell"; and "text messages about the need for the former president to issue a public statement that could have stopped the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol."

Terwilliger did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the letter or confirm the contents of the documents.

Meadows' decision to stop complying with the committee was a reversal after he had initially agreed to the deposition and after Terwilliger said the committee was open to allowing him to decline some questions based on Trump's executive privilege claims.

Terwilliger then told the committee in a letter this week that a deposition had become "untenable" because the committee "has no intention of respecting boundaries" around questions that Trump claims are off-limits.

Trump has attempted to hinder much of the committee's work, including in an ongoing court case, by arguing that Congress cannot obtain information about his private White House conversations.

Terwilliger also told the committee that he learned over the weekend that they had issued a subpoena to a third-party communications provider that he said would include "intensely personal" information about Meadows.

"As a result of careful and deliberate consideration of these factors, we now must decline the opportunity

to appear voluntarily for a deposition," Terwilliger wrote in the Tuesday letter.

In his response, Thompson confirmed the subpoenas to a third party but said it "does not impact Mr. Meadows's production of documents and text messages, which are the areas we seek to develop during his deposition."

The committee in August issued a sweeping demand that telecommunications and social media companies preserve the personal communications of hundreds of people who may have been connected to the attack. But the panel did not ask the companies to turn over the records at that time.

As the investigation has progressed, the committee has "sought data that will help answer important questions" but does not include the content of the communications, according to a committee aide who was not authorized to publicly discuss the investigation and spoke on condition of anonymity. The metadata requested includes dates and times of the communications, which could include both emails and texts.

Associated Press writer Jill Colvin contributed to this report.

How will the world decide when the pandemic is over?

By MARIA CHENG AP Medical Writer

How will the world decide when the pandemic is over?

There's no clear-cut definition for when a pandemic starts and ends, and how much of a threat a global outbreak is posing can vary by country.

"It's somewhat a subjective judgment because it's not just about the number of cases. It's about severity and it's about impact," says Dr. Michael Ryan, the World Health Organization's emergencies chief.

In January 2020, WHO designated the virus a global health crisis "of international concern." A couple months later in March, the United Nations health agency described the outbreak as a "pandemic," reflecting the fact that the virus had spread to nearly every continent and numerous other health officials were saying it could be described as such.

The pandemic may be widely considered over when WHO decides the virus is no longer an emergency of international concern, a designation its expert committee has been reassessing every three months. But when the most acute phases of the crisis ease within countries could vary.

"There is not going to be one day when someone says, 'OK, the pandemic is over,'" says Dr. Chris Woods, an infectious disease expert at Duke University. Although there's no universally agreed-upon criteria, he said countries will likely look for sustained reduction in cases over time.

Scientists expect COVID-19 will eventually settle into becoming a more predictable virus like the flu, meaning it will cause seasonal outbreaks but not the huge surges we're seeing right now. But even then, Woods says some habits, such as wearing masks in public places, might continue.

"Even after the pandemic ends, COVID will still be with us," he says.

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?

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

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

Biden to pay tribute to 'American giant' Bob Dole at Capitol

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — Bob Dole will lie in state Thursday at the U.S. Capitol, as the president and others gather to pay tribute to an "American giant" who served the country in war and in politics with pragmatism, self-deprecating wit and a bygone era's sense of common civility.

President Joe Biden is expected to offer remarks at the morning ceremony with invited guests and congressional leaders in the Capitol Rotunda for the former Republican senator and presidential contender.

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Dole, who served nearly 36 years in Congress, died Sunday at the age of 98.

"For those like me who had the honor of calling him a friend, Bob Dole was an American giant," President Joe Biden said in a Wednesday speech in Kansas City, Mo.

Biden, a Democrat, called Dole, a Republican, "a man of extraordinary courage, both physical and moral courage. A war hero, who sacrificed beyond measure. Who nearly gave his life for our country in World War II. Among the greatest of the great generation."

The service will be the first of several in Washington commemorating Dole's life and legacy. Thursday's event at the Capitol and Friday's funeral at the Washington National Cathedral are closed to the public. But Dole's funeral will be livestreamed Friday at the World War II Memorial on the National Mall, and his motorcade is expected to stop by later at an event with actor Tom Hanks honoring his life and military service before the casket travels to his Kansas hometown and the state capital.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said Dole was a "patriot from the start" and an "exemplary person to serve with in Congress."

"He served at a time when there was mutual respect, even though disagreement on many issues, across the aisle, across the Capitol," Pelosi said Wednesday. "I found him to be a man of his word. Everybody did."

Black draperies hung on doorways under the Capitol dome in preparation for the service. A lectern was positioned in way that the statue of another Kansas statesman, Dwight Eisenhower, will likely be seen in the background behind the day's speakers.

Sen. Mitch McConnell, now the longest-serving Republican Senate leader, said Dole idolized Eisenhower, calling the former president and general a hero who embodied "the finest qualities of the American people."

"We can say with certainty that Eisenhower isn't the only Kansan who meets those standards," McConnell said in a speech earlier this week.

Born a child of the Dust Bowl in Russell, Kan., Dole suffered paralyzing and near-fatal wounds after being shot in World War II that sent him home with a severely damaged right arm that he could not use to shake hands. Instead, Dole held a pen in it and reached out with his left as a way to put greeters at ease.

After earning a law degree, he worked as county attorney and served as a Kansas state legislator before running for Congress in 1960, joining the House for eight years then going on to win the Senate seat. He was the GOP's presidential nominee in 1996, his third and final campaign for president — a race he never won.

Dole's quick wit was on display after losing the presidential contest to incumbent Democrat Bill Clinton, who awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom days before the 1997 inauguration.

McConnell said when it was time for Dole's remarks, he stood at the podium and began: "I, Robert J. Dole ... so solemnly swear ... oh, sorry, wrong speech!"

But that humor was rarely seen on the campaign trail or in his public pronouncements, where it could have helped him win more votes.

Instead, Dole was seen as a GOP "hatchet man," a mentee of Richard Nixon and chairman of the Republican National Committee during the Watergate era. He went on to become the sharp-tongued vice presidential running mate to Gerald Ford, another lost race.

But it was Dole's long career in the Senate where he grew to see the value of reaching across the aisle to Democrats and secured his more lasting achievements — most notably the Americans with Disabilities Act that to this day ensures a level of accessibility as a civil right.

At times, Dole bucked his own party, particularly on a landmark tax bill, and helped create the Martin Luther King Jr. federal holiday.

The former senator announced in February 2021 a diagnosis of stage 4 lung cancer. Biden visited Dole at his home at the Watergate complex.

Food waste becomes California's newest climate change target

By KATHLEEN RONAYNE Associated Press

DAVIS, Calif. (AP) — Banana peels, chicken bones and leftover veggies won't have a place in California trashcans under the nation's largest mandatory residential food waste recycling program that's set to

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take effect in January.

The effort is designed to keep landfills in the most populous U.S. state clear of food waste that damages the atmosphere as it decays. When food scraps and other organic materials break down they emit methane, a greenhouse gas more potent and damaging in the short-term than carbon emissions from fossil fuels.

To avoid those emissions, California plans to start converting residents' food waste into compost or energy, becoming the second state in the U.S. to do so after Vermont launched a similar program last year.

Most people in California will be required to toss excess food into green waste bins rather than the trash. Municipalities will then turn the food waste into compost or use it to create biogas, an energy source that is similar to natural gas.

"This is the biggest change to trash since recycling started in the 1980s," said Rachel Wagoner, director of the California Department of Resources Recycling and Recovery.

She added that it "is the single easiest and fastest thing that every single person can do to effect climate change."

The push by California reflects growing recognition about the role food waste plays in damaging the environment across the United States, where up to 40% of food is wasted, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

A handful of states and nations, including France, have passed laws requiring grocery stores and other large businesses to recycle or donate excess food to charities, but California's program targets households and businesses.

The state passed a law in 2016 aimed at reducing methane emissions by significantly cutting down on discarded food. Organic material like food and yard waste makes up half of everything in California landfills and a fifth of the state's methane emissions, according to CalRecycle.

Starting in January, all cities and counties that provide trash services are supposed to have food recycling programs in place and grocery stores must donate edible food that otherwise would be thrown away to food banks or similar organizations.

"There's just no reason to stick this material in a landfill, it just happens to be cheap and easy to do so," said Ned Spang, faculty lead for the Food Loss and Waste Collaborative at the University of California, Davis.

Vermont, home to 625,000 people compared to California's nearly 40 million, is the only other state that bans residents from throwing their food waste in the trash. Under a law that took effect in July 2020, residents can compost the waste in their yards, opt for curbside pick up or drop it at waste stations. Cities like Seattle and San Francisco have similar programs.

California's law stipulates that by 2025 the state must cut organic waste in landfills by 75% from 2014 levels, or from about 23 million tons to 5.7 million tons.

Most local governments will allow homeowners and apartment dwellers to dump excess food into yard waste bins, with some providing countertop containers to hold the scraps for a few days before taking it outside. Some areas can get exemptions for parts of the law, like rural locations where bears rummage through trash cans.

The food waste will go to facilities for composting or for turning it into energy through anaerobic digestion, a process that creates biogas that can be used like natural gas for heating and electricity.

But California composting facilities face a strict permitting process to take food waste alongside traditional green waste like leaves and only a fifth of the state's facilities may currently accept food waste.

The state also set a 2025 goal of diverting 20% of food that would otherwise go to landfills to feed people in need. Supermarkets must start donating their excess food in January and hotels, restaurants, hospitals, schools and large event venues will start doing so in 2024.

The donation part of California's law will contribute toward a federal goal of cutting food waste in half by 2030.

Davis is among California cities that already have a mandatory food recycling program. Joy Klineberg, a mother of three, puts coffee grounds, fruit rinds and cooking scraps into a metal bin labeled "compost"

on her countertop. When preparing dinners, she empties excess food from the cutting board into the bin.

Every few days, she dumps the contents into her green waste bin outside that is picked up and sent to a county facility. Unpleasant countertop bin smells haven't been a problem, she said.

"All you're changing is where you're throwing things, it's just another bin," she said. "It's really easy, and it's amazing how much less trash you have."

Implementing similar programs in bigger cities is more challenging.

The state's two most populous — Los Angeles and San Diego, which together account for about one of every eight Californians — are among cities that won't have their programs ready for all households next month.

That's because it takes time to buy the necessary equipment, like green waste bins for homes that don't already have them for yard waste and to set up facilities to take the material. Trash collection fees will go up in many places.

Like Davis, CalRecycle wants to focus more on education and less on punishment. Governments can avoid penalties by self-reporting to the state by March if they don't have programs in place and outlining plans for starting them. Cities that refuse to comply could eventually be fined up to \$10,000 per day.

Ken Prue, deputy director of San Diego's environmental services department, said the city put nearly \$9 million in this year's budget to buy more waste bins, kitchen top containers and trucks to haul the additional waste.

Prue hopes San Diego residents will quickly realize the importance of recycling food waste after the program starts next summer.

"Hopefully before they know it, it becomes second nature," he said.

Jussie Smollett awaits verdict as jurors consider case

By DON BABWIN and SARA BURNETT Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — Jurors in Jussie Smollett's trial are expected to resume deliberations Thursday on charges the former "Empire" actor orchestrated a fake attack on himself, then lied to Chicago police about being the victim of an anti-gay, racist hate crime.

The jury deliberated for about two hours on Wednesday following a roughly one-week trial. They asked Judge James Linn for a copy of a calendar prosecutors displayed at trial that indicated relevant dates, including that of the alleged attack and of what two brothers testified was a "dry run" for the Jan. 29, 2019, assault.

In closing arguments earlier Wednesday, a prosecutor told jurors there is "overwhelming evidence" that Smollett staged the attack, then lied to police about it for publicity. His defense attorney said prosecutors' case was based on lies.

Two brothers testified last week that Smollett recruited them to fake the attack near his home in downtown Chicago. They said Smollett, who is Black and gay, told them to put a noose around his neck, yell racist and homophobic slurs, and rough him up in view of a surveillance camera.

Smollett testified that he was the victim of a real hate crime, telling jurors "there was no hoax." He called the brothers "liars" and said the \$3,500 check he wrote them was for meal and workout plans. His attorneys argued that the brothers attacked the actor because they are homophobic and that they made up the story about the attack being staged but said they wouldn't testify against Smollett if he paid them each \$1 million.

In his closing argument Wednesday, special prosecutor Dan Webb told the jury that Smollett caused Chicago police to spend enormous resources investigating what they believe was a fake crime.

"Besides being against the law, it is just plain wrong to outright denigrate something as serious as a real hate crime and then make sure it involved words and symbols that have such historical significance in our country," Webb said.

He also accused Smollett of lying to jurors, saying surveillance video from before the alleged attack and that night contradicts key moments of Smollett's testimony.

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Defense attorney Nenyé Uche called the brothers “sophisticated liars” who may have been motivated to attack Smollett because of homophobia or because they wanted to be hired to work as his security.

“These guys want to make money,” he said.

Webb questioned why Smollett didn’t turn over his cellphone to police or give them a DNA sample or access to his medical records to help with the investigation. Smollett testified he doesn’t trust Chicago police, and that he was concerned about his privacy.

“If he was a true victim of a crime he would not be withholding evidence,” Webb said.

Uche called it “nonsense” for Chicago police to ask Smollett for his DNA when he was still considered the victim of a crime. He noted Smollett later provided DNA to the FBI for a separate investigation into hate mail he had received at the “Empire” studio shortly before the alleged attack.

“He wasn’t hiding anything,” Uche said.

The disorderly conduct charge is a class 4 felony that carries a prison sentence of up to three years, but experts have said if Smollett is convicted, he would likely be placed on probation and ordered to perform community service.

Check out the AP’s complete coverage of the Jussie Smollett case.

Alleged massacre in Myanmar village highlights bitter fight

By GRANT PECK Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — Outrage spread on social media in Myanmar on Wednesday over images and accounts of the alleged killing and burning of 11 villagers captured by government troops in the country’s northwest.

Photos and a video of charred corpses in Done Taw village in Sagaing region circulated widely Tuesday. They were said to have been taken shortly after the men were killed and their bodies set on fire.

The material could not be independently verified. An account given to The Associated Press by a person who said he went to the scene generally matched descriptions of the incident carried by independent Myanmar media.

The government has not commented on the allegations. If confirmed, they would be the latest atrocity in an increasingly bitter struggle following the military’s seizure of power in February and ouster of the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi.

The takeover was initially met with nonviolent street protests, but after police and soldiers used lethal force against demonstrators, violence escalated as opponents of military rule took up arms in self defense.

The witness who spoke to the AP said about 50 troops marched into Done Taw village at about 11 a.m. Tuesday, seizing anyone who did not manage to flee.

“They arrested 11 innocent villagers,” said the witness, who described himself as a farmer and an activist and asked to remain anonymous for his own safety,

He added that the captured men were not members of the locally organized People’s Defense Force, which sometimes engages the army in combat. He said the captives had their hands tied behind them and were set on fire.

He did not give a reason for the soldiers’ assault. Accounts in Myanmar media said they appeared to have acted in retaliation for an attack earlier that morning by People’s Defense Force members.

Other witnesses cited in Myanmar media said the victims were members of a defense force, though the witness who spoke to the AP described them as members of a less formally organized village protection group.

There are resistance activities in the cities and the countryside, but the fighting is deadliest in rural areas where the army can unleash greater force against its targets. In recent months the struggle has been sharpest in Sagaing and other areas of the northwest.

U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric expressed deep concern at the reports “of the horrific killing of 11 people” and strongly condemned such violence, saying “credible reports indicate that five children were among those people killed.”

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Dujarric reminded Myanmar's military authorities of their obligations under international law to ensure the safety and protection of civilians and called for those responsible "for this heinous act" to be held accountable.

He reiterated the U.N.'s condemnation of violence by Myanmar's security forces and stressed that this demands a unified international response. As of Dec. 8, he said, "security forces have killed more than 1,300 unarmed individuals, including more than 75 children, through their use of lethal force or while in their custody since the military takeover on Feb. 1."

The alleged killing in Done Taw was sharply decried by Myanmar's underground National Unity Government, which has established itself as the country's alternative administrative body in place of the military-installed government.

"On the 7th of December in Sagaing region, sickening scenes reminiscent of the Islamic State terrorist group bore witness to the the military's escalation of their acts of terror," the organization's spokesperson, Dr. Sasa, said in a statement.

"The sheer brutality, savagery, and cruelty of these acts shows a new depth of depravity, and proves that, despite the pretense of the relative détente seen over the last few months, the junta never had any intention of deescalating their campaign of violence," said Sasa, who uses one name.

The allegations follow Monday's conviction of Suu Kyi on charges of incitement and violating coronavirus restrictions and sentencing to four years in prison, which was quickly cut in half. The court's action was widely criticized as a further effort by the country's military rulers to roll back the democratic gains of recent years.

In New York, the U.N. Security Council on Wednesday expressed "deep concern" at the sentencing of Suu Kyi, ousted President Win Myint and others and reiterated previous calls for the release of all those arbitrarily detained since the Feb. 1 military takeover.

"The members of the Security Council once again stressed their continued support for the democratic transition in Myanmar, and underlined the need to uphold democratic institutions and processes, refrain from violence, pursue constructive dialogue and reconciliation in accordance with the will and interests of the people of Myanmar, fully respect human rights and fundamental freedoms and uphold the rule of law," a council statement said.

Even amid boycott, IOC still hit with Peng Shuai questions

By STEPHEN WADE AP Sports Writer

IOC President Thomas Bach can't escape repeated questions about Peng Shuai and issues raised by two video calls the IOC has had with her.

The calls were aimed at conveying a message that Peng was safe despite being absent from public view after the three-time Olympic tennis player accused a top Chinese politician of sexual assault almost six weeks ago.

The questions keep coming, even overshadowing a diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Winter Olympics called by the United States, Britain, Canada, Australia, and Lithuania.

Bach has acknowledged that Peng's situation is "fragile." He is in the midst of three days of executive board meetings in Switzerland focused on the opening of the Games in Beijing on Feb. 4. But many of the questions at the daily press briefings are about Peng.

"You have to respect this human being," Bach said Wednesday. "And in such a fragile situation (that) Peng Shuai is in, you have to make all the efforts to build trust. To engage in a human relationship. And this, as you can appreciate, is not easy in a video call."

Bach said the IOC initiated both calls with Chinese sports officials. He said the IOC was open to more calls and did not rule out an "independent" party being involved. Tennis legend Martina Navratilova was suggested to Bach.

Bach said Peng's wishes had to be respected, and he said she has asked for privacy.

No transcript of the calls was provided by the IOC, and Bach has never mentioned her sexual assault

allegations against former Politburo Standing Committee member Zhang Gaoli.

"Why don't you respect Peng Shuai in this and let her decide where her priorities are," Bach said. He said that other parties were involved in the first two calls including what he termed a "native Chinese on the call."

He was thought to be referring to IOC member from China, Li Lingwei,

"In the running of the calls we all were having the same impression that we could not feel her being under pressure," Bach said. "For the rest we can only report what she reported in the call."

"Many people are saying there are suspicions here and there," Bach added. "It's very easy to have suspicions. Suspicions you can have always and about everything."

Teng Biao, a China-born human rights lawyer living in the United States, said it's clear that Peng is not free to speak.

"Of course, Peng Shuai is not safe," Teng said in a recent interview on CNN. "What we know (through videos) is she's still alive, she's still in China. But she is definitely not safe, not well, and she's totally controlled by the Chinese authorities and nobody knows where she is being detained.

"And so the athletes, if they go to China – nobody can guarantee their safety. Beijing doesn't care about sports, what they care (about) — it's political monopoly. So the No. 1 priority for Beijing is to maintain its one-party rule."

More AP Winter Olympics: <https://apnews.com/hub/winter-olympics> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

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

Senate rejects Biden's vaccine mandate for businesses

By KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate narrowly approved a resolution Wednesday to nullify the Biden administration's requirement that businesses with 100 or more workers have their employees be vaccinated against the coronavirus or submit to weekly testing.

The vote was 52-48. The Democratic-led House is unlikely to take the measure up, which means the mandate would stand, though courts have put it on hold for now. Still, the vote gave senators a chance to voice opposition to a policy that they say has sparked fears back home from businesses and from unvaccinated constituents who worry about losing their jobs should the rule go into effect.

"Every so often Washington D.C. does something that lights up the phone lines. This is one of these moments," said Sen. Steve Daines, R-Mont. At home, he said, "this issue is what I hear about. This issue is a top-of-mind issue."

Lawmakers can invalidate certain federal agency regulations if a joint resolution is approved by both houses of Congress and signed by the president, or if Congress overrides a presidential veto. That's unlikely to happen in this case.

Under the rule, private-sector companies with 100 or more workers must require their employees to be fully vaccinated against COVID-19 or be tested for the virus weekly and wear masks on the job. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration said it would work with companies on compliance but would fine them up to more than \$13,000 for each violation, though implementation and enforcement is suspended as the litigation unfolds.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said Americans who have refused to get vaccinated are the biggest impediment to ending the pandemic. He implied that some of the resistance to mandated vaccines is based on politics.

"Some of the anti-vaxxers here in this chamber remind me of what happened 400 years ago when people were clinging to the fact that the sun revolved around the Earth. They just didn't believe science. Or 500 years ago when they were sure the Earth was flat," Schumer said.

Schumer said social media has played a role in spreading falsehoods about the vaccine, and "so has

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the far right." He urged senators to vote against the resolution, sponsored by Sen. Mike Braun, R-Ind.

Republicans said they are supportive of the vaccine, but that the mandate amounts to government overreach.

"His mandates are under fire in the courts. Main Street job creators are complaining against it, and tonight, the U.S. Senate must send a clear message: back off this bad idea," Braun said.

Some argued that the mandate may even contribute to people not getting vaccinated.

"I think, actually, the mandate has made it worse in terms of hardening people who don't want to be told what to do by the government," said Sen. John Barrasso, R-Wyo.

Sen. Shelley Moore Capito, R-W.Va., said a telephone town hall she recently held with constituents made clear they are concerned about keeping their a job if the mandate goes into effect.

"If you look at my state, 40% of my state's workforce stands to lose their job under this mandate," Capito said. "It will be a killer to our economy."

In the end, two Democratic lawmakers voted with 50 Republicans to void the mandate, Sens. Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Jon Tester of Montana. Manchin had said in a tweet that he does not support any federal vaccine mandate for private businesses. Tester's office said his opposition is based on conversations with Montana businesses who "expressed deep concerns about the negative effect on their bottom lines and our state's economy during this fragile recovery period."

Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., sided with the Biden administration, noting that the pandemic is still raging and that deaths are overwhelmingly among the unvaccinated.

"How on earth does it make sense right now to undercut one of the strongest tools that we have to get people vaccinated and stop this virus?" Murray said. "In what world is that a good idea?"

The White House released a statement earlier this week stating that Biden's advisers would recommend he veto the resolution in the unlikely event it makes it to his desk.

"The president wants to see Americans back on the job, and Americans back at work should not face risk from those who are not vaccinated and who refuse to be tested," the White House said.

Deaths in the United States stemming from COVID-19 are running close to 1,600 a day on average. The overall U.S. death toll less than two years into the pandemic could soon reach 800,000.

EXPLAINER: How does an officer use a gun instead of a Taser?

By SEAN MURPHY Associated Press

At former Minnesota police officer Kim Potter's manslaughter trial for fatally shooting Daunte Wright, a Black motorist, the core of her defense is clear: She says she meant to use her Taser but grabbed her handgun instead.

Potter's body-camera video recorded the shooting, with Potter heard saying, "Taser, Taser, Taser" before she fired, followed by, "I grabbed the wrong (expletive) gun."

Many activists have refused to accept the former Brooklyn Center officer's explanation. And the prosecution argued in its opening statement that Potter — a 26-year police veteran — had the experience and training to know better.

Taser-gun mix-ups are rare but they have happened in several states in recent years.

Here are some questions and answers about such incidents:

HOW FREQUENTLY DOES THIS HAPPEN?

Experts agree that such incidents are rare and probably happen fewer than once per year throughout the U.S. A 2012 article published in the monthly law journal *Americans for Effective Law Enforcement* documented nine cases dating back to 2001 in which officers shot suspects with handguns when they said they meant to fire stun guns.

WHY DOES IT HAPPEN?

Reasons that have been cited include officer training, the way they carry their weapons and the pressure they feel during dangerous and chaotic situations. To avoid confusion, officers typically carry their stun guns on their weak sides — the side of their nondominant hand — and away from handguns that

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are carried on their dominant hand's side. That's how Potter carried hers, and the chief of her suburban Minneapolis police department at the time of the shooting said that's how the department's officers were trained.

Prosecutor Erin Eldridge told jurors that the Brooklyn Center Police Department's policy requires that officers carry their Taser on their nondominant side and their firearm on their dominant side. In keeping with that, Potter carried her gun on her right and her Taser on her left.

Officers can choose how they want to position their Tasers in their duty belts, so that they have the option of drawing it from across their body with their dominant hand, or they can choose to draw it with their nondominant hand. Potter had her Taser positioned in a "straight draw" position on her left, so she would draw it with her left hand.

"The only weapon she draws with her right hand is her gun, not her Taser," Eldridge said.

Eldridge also detailed how Brooklyn Center officers go through Taser training every year, and get training materials that include warnings on how confusing a Taser with a handgun can cause death or serious injury.

And she told jurors they'll hear about how Potter's Taser and her handgun both had a very different look and feel, starting with the color. A Taser is bright yellow. Potter's gun was black and weighed about twice as much.

Defense attorney Paul Engh told jurors that an expert will testify about how in chaotic situations like this shooting, a person's ingrained training takes over. He said Potter had 26 years of gun training, but fewer years of training on her Taser, which is a newer weapon.

Engh said they'll hear that Potter made an "action error," the sort in which someone does something while meaning to do something else, such as writing the previous year on a check out of habit, or typing an old password into a computer. He also compared them with errors made under stress by experienced pilots or surgeons.

"We are in a human business," Engh said. "Police officers are human beings. And that's what occurred."

Bill Lewinski, an expert on police psychology and the founder of the Force Science Institute in Mankato, Minnesota, has used the phrase "slip and capture" errors to describe the phenomenon.

Lewinski, who has testified on behalf of police, has said officers sometimes perform the direct opposite of their intended actions under stress — that their actions "slip" and are "captured" by a stronger response. He notes that officers train far more often on drawing and firing their handguns than they do on using their stun guns.

Other experts are skeptical of the theory.

"There's no science behind it," said Geoffrey Alpert, a criminology professor at the University of South Carolina and an expert on police use of force. "It's a good theory, but we have no idea if it's accurate."

Alpert said a major factor in why officers mistakenly draw their firearm is that stun guns typically look and feel like a firearm.

WHAT ARE SOME OTHER CASES?

In one of the best-known cases, a transit officer responding to a fight at a train station in Oakland, California, killed 22-year-old Oscar Grant in 2009. The officer, Johannes Mehserle, testified at trial that, fearing Grant had a weapon, he reached for his stun gun but mistakenly pulled his .40-caliber handgun instead. Grant was shot as he lay face down.

Mehserle was convicted of involuntary manslaughter and sentenced to two years in prison. His department paid \$2.8 million to Grant's daughter and her mother.

In Tulsa, Oklahoma, a white volunteer sheriff's deputy, Robert Bates, said he accidentally fired his handgun when he meant to deploy his stun gun on an unarmed Black man, Eric Harris, who was being held down by other officers in 2015.

Bates apologized for killing Harris but described his deadly mistake as a common problem in law enforcement, saying "This has happened a number of times around the country... You must believe me, it can happen to anyone."

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Bates was convicted of second-degree manslaughter and sentenced to four years in prison. Tulsa County ultimately agreed to pay \$6 million to Harris' estate to settle a federal civil rights lawsuit.

In 2019, a suburban St. Louis police officer, Julia Crews, said she meant to use her stun gun but mistakenly grabbed her service revolver and shot a suspected shoplifter, Ashley Hall, who suffered serious injuries. Crews resigned and was charged with second-degree assault. That was eventually dropped at Hall's request after the victim and the former officer agreed to participate in restorative justice mediation. Separately, the city of Ladue agreed to a \$2 million settlement with Hall.

Find the AP's full coverage of the Daunte Wright case: <https://apnews.com/hub/death-of-daunte-wright>

Father, son arrested in wildfire that threatened Lake Tahoe

By DON THOMPSON Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — A father and son were arrested Wednesday on suspicion of starting a massive California wildfire that destroyed many homes and forced tens of thousands of people to flee Lake Tahoe communities earlier this year, authorities said.

David Scott Smith, 66, and his son, Travis Shane Smith, 32, are accused of reckless arson in a warrant issued before formal charges are filed, the El Dorado County District Attorney's office said.

Mark Reichel, the attorney for both men, said they were arrested Wednesday afternoon and that reckless arson means starting a blaze by accident but "to such a degree that it was considered reckless."

Authorities allege they caused homes to burn and people to be seriously injured in the fire that began in August. The Caldor fire scorched more than 346 square miles (897 square kilometers) from east of Sacramento to the Nevada border, threatening ski resorts and other prominent recreational areas.

The fire destroyed more than 1,000 homes and other buildings while crossing a mostly remote forested area of seasonal cabins.

The fire crossed through three northern counties, destroyed much of the small community of Grizzly Flats and forced tens of thousands of people to evacuate the resort town of South Lake Tahoe before it was contained in October. Five people were injured.

It was one of two massive fires last summer that for the first time in modern history crossed the Sierra Nevada range.

El Dorado County District Attorney Vern Pierson provided few details about the arrest of the Smiths, citing the investigation.

Reichel, the men's lawyer, said: "They are absolutely 100% innocent."

Reichel said he did not know details of the accusation, such as how authorities allege the fire was set.

He said Travis Smith is an electrician and was with his father near where the fire started. The son called 911 to report seeing flames, Reichel said.

The son made several 911 calls because the calls kept dropping in the rugged area, and both men also warned campers about the fire, Reichel said.

"Neither one has ever been in trouble with the law in their life. They're very law-abiding people," he said.

The pair have a scheduled court appearance on Friday, Reichel said.

"There has been no evidence submitted into a court subject to my cross-examination ... that proves any of the prosecution's evidence yet. So I urge everyone to wait and hear what really happened before they form any opinions," Reichel added.

The district attorney's office said the case was developed with the U.S. Forest Service, California's fire-fighting agency and the California Department of Justice, with help from the Sacramento County District Attorney's crime lab.

Associated Press Writer Robert Jablon contributed from Los Angeles.

Instagram head faces senators amid anger over possible harms

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By MARCY GORDON and BARBARA ORTUTAY AP Business Writers

WASHINGTON (AP) — The head of Instagram on Wednesday met with deep skepticism on Capitol Hill over new measures the social media platform is adopting to protect young users.

Adam Mosseri appeared before a Senate panel and faced off with lawmakers angry over revelations of how the photo-sharing platform can harm some young users. Senators are also demanding the company commit to making changes and increase its transparency.

Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., who heads the Senate Commerce subcommittee on consumer protection, dismissed as “a public relations tactic” some safety measures announced by the popular photo-sharing platform.

“I believe that the time for self-policing and self-regulation is over,” Blumenthal said. “Self-policing depends on trust. Trust is over.”

Under sharp questioning by senators of both parties, Mosseri defended the company’s conduct and the efficacy of its new safety measures. He challenged the assertion that Instagram has been shown by research to be addictive for young people. Instagram, which along with Facebook is part of Meta Platforms Inc., has an estimated 1 billion users of all ages.

On Tuesday, Instagram introduced a previously announced feature that urges teenagers to take breaks from the platform. The company also announced other tools, including parental controls due to come out early next year, that it says are aimed at protecting young users from harmful content.

Senators of both parties were united in condemnation of the social network giant and Instagram, the photo-sharing juggernaut valued at some \$100 billion that Facebook acquired for \$1 billion in 2012.

The hearing grew more confrontational and emotionally charged as it went on.

“Sir, I have to tell you, you did sound callous,” Sen. Marsha Blackburn of Tennessee, the panel’s senior Republican, told Mosseri near the end of the hearing.

Senators repeatedly tried to win commitments from Mosseri for Instagram to provide full results of its internal research and its computer formulas for ranking content to independent monitors and Congress. They also tried to enlist his support for legislation that would curb the ways in which Big Tech deploys social media geared toward young people.

Mosseri responded mostly with general endorsements of openness and accountability, insisting that Instagram is an industry leader in transparency.

The issue is becoming increasingly urgent. An alarming advisory issued Tuesday by U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy warned about a mental health crisis among children and young adults that has been worsened by the coronavirus pandemic. He said tech companies must design social media platforms that strengthen, rather than harm, young people’s mental health.

Meta, which is based in Menlo Park, California, has been roiled by public and political outrage over the disclosures by former Facebook employee Frances Haugen. She has made the case before lawmakers in the U.S., Britain and Europe that that the company’s systems amplify online hate and extremism and that the company elevates profits over the safety of users.

Haugen, a data scientist who had worked in Facebook’s civic integrity unit, buttressed her assertions with a trove of internal company documents she secretly copied and provided to federal securities regulators and Congress.

The Senate panel has examined Facebook’s use of information from its own researchers that could indicate potential harm for some of its young users, especially girls, while it publicly downplayed the negative impacts. For some Instagram-devoted teens, peer pressure generated by the visually focused app led to mental-health and body-image problems, and in some cases, eating disorders and suicidal thoughts, the research detailed in the Facebook documents showed.

The revelations in a report by The Wall Street Journal, based on the documents leaked by Haugen, set off a wave of recriminations from lawmakers, critics of Big Tech, child-development experts and parents.

“As head of Instagram, I am especially focused on the safety of the youngest people who use our services,” Mosseri testified. “This work includes keeping underage users off our platform, designing age-

appropriate experiences for people ages 13 to 18, and building parental controls. Instagram is built for people 13 and older. If a child is under the age of 13, they are not permitted on Instagram.”

Mosseri outlined the suite of measures he said Instagram has taken to protect young people on the platform. They include keeping kids under 13 off it, restricting direct messaging between kids and adults, and prohibiting posts that encourage suicide and self-harm.

But, as researchers both internal and external to Meta have documented, the reality is different. Kids under 13 often sign up for Instagram with or without their parents’ knowledge by lying about their age. And posts about suicide and self-harm still reach children and teens, sometimes with disastrous effects.

Ortutay reported from Oakland, California.

This story has been corrected to reflect that Adam Mosseri is the head of Instagram, not the CEO.

Follow Marcy Gordon at <https://twitter.com/mgordonap>

California plans to be abortion sanctuary if Roe overturned

By ADAM BEAM Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — With more than two dozen states poised to ban abortion if the U.S. Supreme Court gives them the OK next year, California clinics and their allies in the state Legislature on Wednesday revealed a plan to make the state a “sanctuary” for those seeking reproductive care, including possibly paying for travel, lodging and procedures for people from other states.

The California Future of Abortion Council, made up of more than 40 abortion providers and advocacy groups, released a list of 45 recommendations for the state to consider if the high court overturns *Roe v. Wade* — the 48-year-old decision that forbids states from outlawing abortion.

The recommendations are not just a liberal fantasy. Some of the state’s most important policymakers helped write them, including Toni Atkins, the San Diego Democrat who leads the state Senate and attended multiple meetings.

Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom started the group himself and in an interview last week with The Associated Press said some of the report’s details will be included in his budget proposal in January.

“We’ll be a sanctuary,” Newsom said, adding he’s aware patients will likely travel to California from other states to seek abortions. “We are looking at ways to support that inevitability and looking at ways to expand our protections.”

Abortion, perhaps more than any other issue, has divided the country for decades along mostly traditional partisan lines. A new decision overturning *Roe v. Wade*, which could come next summer, would be the culmination of more than 40 years of conservative activism. But Wednesday’s report offers a first glimpse of how Democratic-dominated states could respond and how the debate over abortion access would change.

California already pays for abortions for many low-income residents through the state’s Medicaid program. And California is one of six states that require private insurance companies to cover abortions, although many patients still end up paying deductibles and co-payments.

But money won’t be a problem for state-funded abortion services for patients from other states. California’s coffers have soared throughout the pandemic, fueling a record budget surplus this year. Next year, the state’s independent Legislative Analyst’s Office predicts California will have a surplus of about \$31 billion.

California’s affiliates of Planned Parenthood, the nation’s largest abortion provider, got a sneak preview of how people might seek abortions outside their home states this year when a Texas law that outlawed abortion after six weeks of pregnancy was allowed to take effect. California clinics reported a slight increase in patients from Texas.

Now, California abortion providers are asking California to make it easier for those people to get to the

state.

The report recommends funding — including public spending — to support patients seeking abortion for travel expenses such as gas, lodging, transportation and child care. It asks lawmakers to reimburse abortion providers for services to those who can't afford to pay — including those who travel to California from other states whose income is low enough that they would qualify for state-funded abortions under Medicaid if they lived there.

It's unclear about how many people would come to California for abortions if Roe v. Wade is overturned. California does not collect or report abortion statistics. The Guttmacher Institute, a research group that supports abortion rights, said 132,680 abortions were performed in California in 2017, or about 15% of all abortions nationally. That number includes people from out of state as well as teenagers, who are not required to have their parents' permission for an abortion in California.

Planned Parenthood, which accounts for about half of California's abortion clinics, said it served 7,000 people from other states last year.

A huge influx of people from other states "will definitely destabilize the abortion provider network," said Fabiola Carrion, interim director for reproductive and sexual health at the national Health Law Program. She said out-of-state abortions would also likely be later term procedures, which are more complicated and expensive.

The report asks lawmakers to help clinics increase their workforce to prepare for more patients by giving scholarships to medical students who pledge to offer abortion services in rural areas, help them pay off their student loans and assist with their monthly liability insurance premiums.

"We're looking at how to build capacity and build workforce," said Jodi Hicks, CEO of Planned Parenthood Affiliates of California. "It will take a partnership and investment with the state."

Abortion opponents in California, meanwhile, are also preparing for a potential surge of patients from other states seeking the procedure — only they hope to convince them not to do it.

Jonathan Keller, president and CEO of the California Family Council, said California has about 160 pregnancy resource centers whose aim is to convince women not to get abortions. He said about half of those centers are medical clinics, while the rest are faith-based counseling centers.

Many of the centers are located near abortion clinics in an attempt to entice people to seek their counseling before opting to end pregnancies. Keller said many are already planning on increasing their staffing if California gets an increase of patients.

"Even if we are not facing any immediate legislative opportunities or legislative victories, it's a reminder that the work of changing hearts and minds and also providing real support and resources to women facing unplanned pregnancies — that work will always continue," Keller said.

He added: "In many ways, that work is going to be even more important, both in light of the Supreme Court's decision and in light of whatever Sacramento decides they are going to do in response."

Jussie Smollett case in jurors' hands at Chicago trial

By DON BABWIN and SARA BURNETT Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — A prosecutor told jurors Wednesday there is "overwhelming evidence" that Jussie Smollett lied to Chicago police about being the victim of an anti-gay, racist hate crime, while a defense attorney called the case a "house of cards" built on testimony from two liars.

The lawyers' closing arguments capped just over one week of testimony in the case against the former "Empire" actor. The jury deliberated for about two hours Wednesday but broke for the day without reaching a verdict. They are expected to resume deliberations Thursday.

In his closing, special prosecutor Dan Webb said Smollett caused Chicago police to spend enormous resources investigating an alleged crime that they now believe is fake. Smollett, who is Black and gay, told police someone put a noose around his neck and yelled racist and homophobic slurs during the January 2019 attack near his downtown Chicago home.

"Besides being against the law, it is just plain wrong to outright denigrate something as serious as a

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real hate crime and then make sure it involved words and symbols that have such historical significance in our country," Webb said.

He also accused Smollett of lying to jurors, saying surveillance video from before the alleged attack and that night contradicts key moments of Smollett's testimony.

"At the end of the day, he lacks any credibility whatsoever," Webb said.

Defense attorney Neny Uche said in his closing argument that two brothers who testified that Smollett orchestrated the attack and paid them to carry it out are "sophisticated liars" out for money.

"The entire prosecution's case, including the foundation of the case, is built like a house of cards," Uche said.

The brothers testified last week that Smollett recruited and paid them for the hoax, telling them to put a noose around his neck, yell racist and homophobic slurs and rough him up in view of a surveillance camera, and that he said he wanted video of the hoax made public via social media.

Smollett testified that he was the victim of a real hate crime, telling jurors "there was no hoax." He called the brothers "liars" and said the \$3,500 check he wrote them was for meal and workout plans. His attorneys argued that the brothers attacked the actor because they are homophobic and that they made up the story about the attack being staged but said they wouldn't testify against Smollett if he paid them each \$1 million.

Smollett said he was returning home around 2 a.m. on Jan. 29, 2019, when someone yelled a racist, homophobic remark that referenced the TV show "Empire." The person also shouted something about "MAGA country," an apparent reference to then-President Donald Trump's slogan "Make America Great Again." The slogan also had been scrawled on some hate mail, featuring a drawing of a stick figure hanging by a noose, that Smollett testified he had received at the "Empire" set.

Smollett said a man hit him in the head and he fell to the ground and another man kicked him before the attackers ran away. Smollett said he noticed a rope, like a noose, around his neck after the attack. When he returned home, a friend called Chicago police, something Smollett said he wouldn't have done because as a Black man he doesn't trust police.

Uche told the jury that one of the brothers, Olabingo Osundairo, posted homophobic slurs on social media. He also recalled that Abimbola Osundairo testified he went to a bathhouse with Smollett but denied any sexual relationship. Smollett later testified that the men performed sex acts together at the bathhouse. Uche suggested Olabingo's homophobia and Abimbola's "self-hatred" were motives for their attack.

Another possible motive, Uche said, was that Abimbola Osundairo wanted to be hired as Smollett's security.

Webb said Smollett lied when he testified that he picked up the Osundairo brothers a few days before the alleged attack so they could work out, rather than to do a "dry run" of the fake attack, as the brothers told jurors last week. In surveillance video, the men are seen driving around Smollett's apartment building three times, but Smollett never parked his car to go to the gym.

The brothers testified that Smollett pointed out a surveillance camera near the intersection that would record the fake attack, so it could be publicized on social media. But Smollett testified Tuesday that it wasn't unusual for him to drive around in circles, and that he canceled the plan to work out because he didn't want to work out with Olabingo Osundairo, whom he hadn't invited along.

Uche told jurors that Smollett often drove around smoking marijuana and making music, and he questioned why prosecutors didn't obtain surveillance video of him doing so.

"They don't want to do it because it would show you it wasn't a dry run," Uche said.

Webb also referenced surveillance video that shows the Osundairo brothers walking around the area the night of the alleged attack. Webb questioned how the brothers — who didn't live nearby — would know to be in the area around 2 a.m. during freezing cold weather for the fake attack.

"They knew where he was going to be because Smollett told them where he was going to be," Webb said.

But Uche said the brothers testified they arrived 40 minutes early, adding "they were casing him."

Webb also questioned why Smollett didn't turn over his cellphone to police or give them a DNA sample or access to his medical records to help with the investigation. Smollett testified he doesn't trust Chicago

police, and that he was concerned about his privacy.

Uche called it "nonsense" for Chicago police to ask Smollett for his DNA when he was still considered a victim of a crime. He noted Smollett later provided DNA to the FBI for a separate investigation into hate mail he had received at the "Empire" studio shortly before the alleged attack.

"He wasn't hiding anything," Uche said.

The disorderly conduct charge is a class 4 felony that carries a prison sentence of up to three years, but experts have said if Smollett is convicted, he would likely be placed on probation and ordered to perform community service.

Before leaving for the day Wednesday, the jury asked Judge James Linn for a copy of a calendar that prosecutors displayed at trial that indicates relevant days, including the day of the attack and the day they say Smollett and the brothers conducted the "dry run."

Check out the AP's complete coverage of the Jussie Smollett case.

The AP Interview: CDC chief says omicron mostly mild so far

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

ATLANTA (AP) — More than 40 people in the U.S. have been found to be infected with the omicron variant so far, and more than three-quarters of them had been vaccinated, the chief of the CDC said Wednesday. But she said nearly all of them were only mildly ill.

In an interview with The Associated Press, Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said the data is very limited and the agency is working on a more detailed analysis of what the new mutant form of the coronavirus might hold for the U.S.

"What we generally know is the more mutations a variant has, the higher level you need your immunity to be. ... We want to make sure we bolster everybody's immunity. And that's really what motivated the decision to expand our guidance," Walensky said, referencing the recent approval of boosters for all adults.

She said "the disease is mild" in almost all of the cases seen so far, with reported symptoms mainly cough, congestion and fatigue. One person was hospitalized, but no deaths have been reported, CDC officials said.

Some cases can become increasingly severe as days and weeks pass, and Walensky noted that the data is a very early, first glimpse of U.S. omicron infections. The earliest onset of symptoms of any of the first 40 or so cases was Nov. 15, according to the CDC.

The omicron variant was first identified in South Africa last month and has since been reported in 57 countries, according to the World Health Organization.

The first U.S. case was reported on Dec. 1. As of Wednesday afternoon, the CDC had recorded 43 cases in 19 states. Most were young adults. About a third of those patients had traveled internationally.

More than three-quarters of those patients had been vaccinated, and a third had boosters, Walensky said. Boosters take about two weeks to reach full effect, and some of the patients had received their most recent shot within that period, CDC officials said.

Fewer than 1% of the U.S. COVID-19 cases genetically sequenced last week were the omicron variant; the delta variant accounted for more than 99%.

Scientists are trying to better understand how easily it spreads. British officials said Wednesday that they think the omicron variant could become the dominant version of the coronavirus in the United Kingdom in as soon as a month.

The CDC has yet to make any projections on how the variant could affect the course of the pandemic in the U.S. Walensky said officials are gathering data but many factors could influence how the pandemic evolves.

"When I look to what the future holds, so much of that is definitely about the science, but it's also about coming together as a community to do things that prevent disease in yourself and one another. And I think a lot of what our future holds depends on how we come together to do that," she said.

The CDC is also trying to establish whether the omicron variant causes milder — or more severe — illness

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than other coronavirus types. The finding that nearly all of the cases so far are mild may be a reflection that this first look at U.S. omicron cases captured mainly vaccinated people, who are expected to have milder illnesses, CDC officials said.

Another key question is whether it is better at evading vaccines or the immunity people build from a bout with COVID-19.

This week, scientists in South Africa reported a small laboratory study that found antibodies created by vaccines were not as effective at preventing omicron infections as they were at stopping other versions of the coronavirus.

On Wednesday, vaccine manufacturer Pfizer said that while two doses may not be protective enough to prevent infection, lab tests showed a booster increased levels of virus-fighting antibodies by 25-fold.

Blood samples taken a month after a booster showed people harbored levels of omicron-neutralizing antibodies that were similar to amounts proven protective against earlier variants after two doses, the company said.

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Can democracy still deliver? Biden convening global summit

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden is convening global leaders Thursday to pledge strong new commitments to democracy, even as the U.S. itself is facing some of the gravest threats in years to its democratic traditions and institutions at home.

As the president launches the administration's inaugural Summit for Democracy, determined to show the world democracy can still work, the nation that's been long considered a shining example is seen by various measures as a backslider.

Local elected officials are resigning at an alarming rate amid confrontations with angry voices at school board meetings, elections offices and town halls. States are passing laws to limit access to the ballot, making it more difficult for Americans to vote. And the Jan. 6 attack at the Capitol has left many in one U.S. political party clinging to Donald Trump's false claims of a stolen election, eroding trust in the accuracy of the vote.

America must do better, critics at home and abroad insist.

"Can our democracy overcome the lies, anger, hate, and fears that have pulled us apart?" Biden asked during a joint session of Congress at the start of his presidency, months after the Capitol insurrection.

"America's adversaries — the autocrats of the world — are betting we can't."

It's an unsettling moment for the world's leading democracy as authoritarianism grows around the globe, raising questions about the United States' ability to lead by example and intensifying pressure on the Biden administration to not only promote democracy abroad but do more to shore it up at home.

As allies gather for the two-day virtual summit, the White House is approaching the meeting "from a place of humility," understanding that no democracy is perfect, not even the U.S., according to a senior official granted anonymity to discuss the thinking at the White House.

At the forum, intended for some 110 participating countries to announce new commitments for strengthening democracy, Biden plans to speak about the importance of voting rights at home, much as he did at an anniversary celebration of the capital's Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial, the official said. At the time, the president called voting "that fundamental right" and decried efforts to curtail it as "the most un-American thing" imaginable.

The president has also said that passage of his ambitious domestic agenda — the \$1 trillion bipartisan infrastructure bill he signed into law, as well as the roughly \$2 trillion "Build Back Better Act" of social and climate change initiatives moving through the Senate — will demonstrate how democracy can improve people's lives.

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"The United States has a thriving democracy, but it's been hurting in recent years," said Michael Abramowitz, the president of Freedom House, whose annual report marked a 15th consecutive year of a global democratic slide.

"Right now, we're going through a phase in America where it's very difficult to get things done and to really prove that democracy can deliver," he said.

One early test will come Thursday as the U.S. House moves to approve the Protecting Our Democracy Act, the third in a trio of bills alongside the Freedom to Vote Act and the John Lewis Voting Rights Act that Democrats in Congress have put forward.

A fourth bill being drafted would impose changes to the Electoral Count Act, the once-routine process of tallying and certifying the presidential election ballots that was severely tested on Jan. 6 as Trump urged followers to challenge the vote.

But the legislation churning through Congress seems destined to fail, facing opposition from Republicans who dismiss the bills as partisan overreach.

Some Republicans say the bills are unnecessary or need to be dramatically scaled back. Others are perpetuating Trump's false claims of election fraud despite dozens of U.S. court cases that found no evidence of voting irregularities. Some Republicans are now downplaying the attack at the Capitol, even as hundreds of rioters are facing charges in courts nationwide.

The White House is gearing up for a year of action on what it sees as rebuilding democracy. The Republican blockade against the Democrats' bills in Congress has revived private Senate negotiations over changing the chamber's filibuster rules to muscle past a nearly impossible 60-vote threshold in the evenly split 50-50 chamber.

Some are pushing for action ahead the 2022 congressional elections amid fears of new restrictions on the right to vote and outside actors sowing misinformation.

"If President Biden really believes — as he should — that we're in an existential battle to protect democracy, when will he put the political capital behind these bills that such a crisis warrants?" said Ian Bassin, executive director of Protect Democracy, a nonpartisan, anti-authoritarianism organization.

Globally, meanwhile, this week's summit gets underway as outside groups are raising alarms about a worldwide slide of democracy, fueled by populations that have grown increasingly frustrated by stubborn income inequality and the COVID-19 crisis with its restrictions and millions of lives lost.

Authoritarianism is on the rise in some some ostensibly democratic countries, alongside shifting attitudes about the best forms of government amid anti-democratic influences and commentary from China and Russia. A Pew report released this week said that while "people like democracy, their commitment to it is often not very strong." Even wealthy countries, including the U.S., have some people who favor military rule, the report said.

Another group, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, said in its annual report that the number of countries experiencing democratic backsliding "has never been as high" as the past decade, with the U.S. added to the list alongside India and Brazil.

The legislation being voted on Thursday in the House tries to claw back some of what its supporters consider executive overreach that has been building in the U.S. for years and intensified during Trump's term. It includes provisions to strengthen enforcement of congressional subpoenas, protect whistleblowers and provide for congressional oversight of presidential emergency declarations, among other provisions, many of them previously backed by Republicans.

Rep. Adam Schiff, the Democratic chairman of the Intelligence Committee, said the House panel investigating the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol has also been "brainstorming" reforms to the electoral count that was disrupted that day the mob stormed the building.

"The Jan. 6 attack, and the image that gave the United States about the dysfunctionality of our system at present, I think, is a real body blow to the cause of democracy around the world," Schiff said in an interview with The Associated Press.

Schiff said from his own recent talks with Biden, "the president is very much focused like a laser on the

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challenge to democracy around the world, but also at home.”

Staff writer Aamer Madhani contributed to this report.

EXPLAINER: What does an Olympic diplomatic boycott achieve?

By GRAHAM DUNBAR AP Sports Writer

GENEVA (AP) — Diplomatic boycotts of the Olympics aim to snub host nations while keeping athletes free to compete.

A small cascade of government boycotts hit China on Wednesday, less than two months before the Beijing Olympics open.

The impact of these political weapons on athletes at the games should be close to zero, and viewers should see no difference in their broadcast content.

Their aim is calculated to hurt the pride of host nations such as China, which often have both sports and politics mixed into their motives for staging events as big as an Olympics or soccer’s World Cup.

In Australia, then the United Kingdom and Canada, governments announced their refusal to send officials to the Winter Games being held Feb. 4-20. The move against China started in the United States on Monday.

Those countries are longtime diplomatic allies that want to shine attention on China’s human rights record, and especially the treatment of its Muslim-majority Uyghur people that some call genocide.

The sting will also be felt by the International Olympic Committee, whose leaders have a keen sense of its potential place in world politics even while touting the neutrality it is bound to by the Olympic Charter.

IOC leaders like to burnish the Olympic brand by saying their sports event is the only one to bring more than 200 national teams together in peace and friendship as an example to the world.

Any diversion from the message of global unity is unwelcome.

OLYMPIC MISSION

The Olympic Charter is the code of rules and bylaws that governs the IOC and “sets forth the conditions for the celebration of the Olympic Games.”

Rule 2 relating to the “Mission and role of the IOC” helps explain why any boycott is treated as an affront to its principles.

It includes: “To take action to strengthen the unity of the Olympic Movement, to protect its independence, to maintain and promote its political neutrality and to preserve the autonomy of sport.”

For the IOC, political neutrality should mean not calling out an Olympic host nation for its policies and conduct outside of sports or not connected to staging the games.

“We always ask for as much respect as possible from the political world and the least possible interference on our sports and Olympic world and ideals,” senior IOC member Juan Antonio Samaranch said this week.

BOYCOTT HISTORY

The IOC still carries emotional scars from the peak period of more than 100 countries combined staging full boycotts of three straight Summer Games from 1976 to 1984.

The 1976 Montreal Olympics was hit mostly by African countries protesting New Zealand taking part after its rugby team toured Apartheid-era South Africa.

The 1980 Moscow Olympics went ahead without the United States and dozens of other teams protesting the Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan.

The Soviet bloc and some allies retaliated with a boycott of the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics.

Thousands of athletes missed competing at an Olympic Games four decades ago. None should miss the Beijing Winter Games because of a diplomatic boycott.

VIP VISITORS

Who will stay at home instead of traveling to Beijing next February? Senior lawmakers and diplomatic officials, mostly, when the opening ceremony is held Feb. 4.

There is no diplomatic obligation on heads of state to attend an Olympic Games, and attending a Winter

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Games is less of a hot ticket than the summer edition.

It is, however, nice to show up for an old ally's party or build alliances with potential new friends.

Then-President George W. Bush went to Beijing for the opening of the 2008 Summer Games that was supposed to be a coming-out party for a more welcoming China.

In July, first lady Jill Biden led the American contingent to the Summer Olympics in Tokyo.

Going to the games can also create diplomatic issues, as Vice President Mike Pence found at the 2018 Winter Games in South Korea.

Pence found himself in an awkward situation sitting close to North Korea's delegation at an opening ceremony at Pyeongchang that became a celebration of a relatively short-lived thaw in relations between the Korean neighbors.

The Korean accord had been warmly encouraged by the IOC, seeming to bend its definition of political neutrality to the limit.

CHINA'S REACTION

China's reaction to the spreading diplomatic boycott has ranged from "not bothered at all" to "clearly quite bothered."

The U.S. announcement Monday prompted the Chinese Embassy in Washington to publish in a tweet: "In fact, no one would care about whether these people come or not, and it has no impact whatsoever on the #Beijing2022 to be successfully held."

In Beijing, the foreign ministry said the Americans were interfering "out of ideological prejudice and based on lies and rumors."

Australia was dismissed Wednesday as "immature, arrogant and stupid to follow the US" by the Chinese state-run Global Times newspaper. "Countries with rationality would think of the interests of their own people instead of cooperating with the US' futile stunt."

FUTURE REPRISALS

Adding piquancy to the current boycott is that it's being done by reliable recent and future Olympic host nations.

The U.S. and Australia hosting the Summer Games, in 2028 at Los Angeles and 2032 in Brisbane, could provoke Chinese reprisals.

American Olympic officials are also likely to seek IOC support for staging the Winter Games again at Salt Lake City, which was also the 2002 host.

Canada hosted the 2010 Vancouver Winter Games and when London staged the 2012 Olympics, the mayor of the city was Boris Johnson. He announced the U.K.'s diplomatic boycott in its parliament Wednesday as prime minister.

More AP Winter Olympics: <https://apnews.com/hub/winter-olympics> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

Defense team rests in Elizabeth Holmes fraud trial

By MICHAEL LIEDTKE Associated Press

SAN JOSE, Calif. (AP) — Fallen entrepreneur Elizabeth Holmes has finished her attempt to persuade a jury that she suffered lapses in business judgment but never engaged in fraud while running blood-testing startup Theranos.

Her defense lawyers rested their case Wednesday shortly after she walked off the witness stand.

That gave Holmes the final say among the more than 30 witnesses who testified in a high-profile trial that began three months ago in the heart of Silicon Valley. It's the same locale where Holmes became a media sensation before Theranos collapsed in ruins amid evidence that its ballyhooed blood-testing technology was dangerously flawed.

U.S. District Judge Edward Davila recessed the trial for a week to allow time for refining the instructions to the jury in a complicated case what began 3 1/2 years ago with Holmes' indictment on multiple counts of fraud. If convicted, she could be sentenced 20 years in prison.

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Closing arguments are scheduled for Dec. 16-17. Depending on the duration of those arguments, the jury could get the case late in the day of Dec. 17 and continue deliberations during the week of Dec. 20.

The abrupt end of the defense's case came as somewhat of a surprise. Holmes' lawyers had indicated that they might call on a psychologist to discuss the allegations of emotional and sexual abuse Holmes, 37, had raised earlier in her testimony against her former lover and business partner, Sunny Balwani, 56. Holmes was just one of the three witnesses to testify for the defense, but she spent more than 25 hours on the stand since she was sworn Nov. 19.

The decision to let Holmes herself have the last word was an indication that her lawyers believed she did a compelling job telling her story, said David Ring, an attorney who has represented victims of alleged sexual abuse and has been following the trial closely.

"You want to end on a good note, and it sounded like they felt like she was their best witness," Ring said. "You also don't want to risk having a lot of psychological gobbly goop get into the jury's minds, so you can end with a bang, not a whimper."

Holmes, Theranos' CEO for 15 years, spent some more time Wednesday blaming Balwani for neglecting to fix the blood-testing problems that he had told her he would address as the company's chief operating officer and her most trusted adviser.

She also made it clear that Balwani was a volatile man who she tried not to "ignite" whenever he would "blow off steam through texts." She also emphasized she wasn't responsible for all the key decisions at Theranos from 2010 until she dumped Balwani in 2016.

That six-year stretch spanned a period when Holmes was the subject of flattering articles portraying her as a tech visionary. But a series of explosive articles published in The Wall Street Journal beginning in late 2015 revealed that Theranos' blood-tests were producing faulty results that misled doctors and patients. John Carreyrou, the reporter who wrote those pivotal stories, sat in the back of a packed San Jose, California, courtroom throughout Holmes' testimony.

Before Theranos melted down, Holmes and Balwani raised more than \$900 million from a list of billionaire investors that included media mogul Rupert Murdoch and the Walton family behind Walmart. That while assembling a board of directors that included former Cabinet members ranging from the Nixon to Trump administrations.

Jeffrey Coopersmith, Balwani's attorney, has vehemently denied Holmes' attempts to blame him for Theranos' downfall, as well as the allegations of partner abuse. He told Davila that Balwani would exercise his Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination if he were called to testify during Holmes' trial. Balwani is facing similar fraud charges in a trial scheduled to start next month.

But before that drama begins, a jury of 10 men and four women, including two alternates, will finally get their chance to determine if Holmes will be branded as a crook, instead of Silicon Valley sensation who revolutionized health care as she set out to do in 2003 when she dropped out of Stanford University to found Theranos.

This story has been corrected to reflect the closing arguments are scheduled for Dec. 16-17, instead of Dec. 15-16.

Explainer: What caused Amazon's outage? Will there be more?

By MATT O'BRIEN and FRANK BAJAK AP Technology Writers

Robotic vacuum cleaners wouldn't start. Doorbell cameras stopped watching for package thieves, though some of those deliveries were canceled anyway. Netflix and Disney movies got interrupted and The Associated Press had trouble publishing the news.

A major outage in Amazon's cloud computing network Tuesday severely disrupted services at a wide range of U.S. companies for hours, raising questions about the vulnerability of the internet and its concentration in the hands of a few firms.

HOW DID IT HAPPEN?

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Amazon has still said nothing about what, exactly, went wrong. The company limited its communications Tuesday to terse technical explanations on an Amazon Web Services dashboard and a brief statement delivered via spokesperson Richard Rocha that acknowledged the outage had affected Amazon's own warehouse and delivery operations but said the company was "working to resolve the issue as quickly as possible." It didn't immediately respond to further questions Wednesday.

The incident at Amazon Web Services mostly affected the eastern U.S., but still impacted everything from airline reservations and auto dealerships to payment apps and video streaming services to Amazon's own massive e-commerce operation.

WHAT IS AWS?

Amazon Web Services is a cloud-service operation — it stores its customers' data, runs their online activities and more — and a huge profit center for Amazon. It holds roughly 40% of the \$64 billion global cloud infrastructure market, a larger share than its closest rivals Microsoft, Alibaba and Google, combined, according to research firm Gartner.

It was formerly run by Amazon CEO Andy Jassy, who succeeded founder Jeff Bezos in July.

TOO MANY EGGS IN ONE BASKET?

Some cybersecurity experts have warned for years about the potentially ugly consequences of allowing a handful of big tech companies to dominate key internet operations.

"The latest AWS outage is a prime example of the danger of centralized network infrastructure," said Sean O'Brien, a visiting lecturer in cybersecurity at Yale Law School. "Though most people browsing the internet or using an app don't know it, Amazon is baked into most of the apps and websites they use each day." O'Brien said it's important to build a new network model that resembles the peer-to-peer roots of the early internet. Big outages have already knocked huge swaths of the world offline, as happened during an October Facebook incident.

Even under the current model, companies do have some options to split their services between different cloud providers, although it can be complicated, or to at least make sure they can move their services to a different region run by the same provider. Tuesday's outage mostly affected Amazon's "US East 1" region.

"Which means if you had critical systems only available in that region, you were in trouble," said Servaas Verbiest, lead cloud evangelist at Sungard Availability Services. "If you heavily embraced the AWS ecosystem and are locked into using solely their services and functions, you must ensure you balance your workloads between regions."

HASN'T THIS HAPPENED BEFORE?

Yes. The last major AWS outage was in November 2020. There have been numerous other disruptive and lengthy internet outages involving other providers. In June, the behind-the-scenes content distributor Fastly suffered a failure that briefly took down dozens of major internet sites including CNN, The New York Times and Britain's government home page. Another that month affected provider Akamai during peak business hours in Asia in June.

In the October outage, Facebook — now known as Meta Platforms — blamed a "faulty configuration change" for an hours-long worldwide outage that took down Instagram and WhatsApp in addition to its titular platform.

WHAT ABOUT THE GOVERNMENT?

It was unclear how, or whether, Tuesday's outage affected governments, but many of them also rely on Amazon and its rivals.

Among the most influential organizations to rethink its approach of depending on a single cloud provider was the Pentagon, which in July canceled a disputed cloud-computing contract with Microsoft that could eventually have been worth \$10 billion. It will instead pursue a deal with both Microsoft and Amazon and possibly other cloud service providers such as Google, Oracle and IBM.

The National Security Agency earlier this year awarded Amazon a contract with a potential estimated value of \$10 billion to be the sole manager of the NSA's own migration to cloud computing. The contract is known by its agency code name "Wild and Stormy." The General Accountability Office in October sustained a bid protest by Microsoft, finding that certain parts of the NSA's decision were "unreasonable,"

although the full decision is classified.

AP writer Nomaan Merchant contributed to this report.

Justice Dept. still probing civil rights era police killings

By JAY REEVES Associated Press

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (AP) — The Justice Department's decision to close its investigation of Emmett Till's slaying all but ended the possibility of new charges in the teen's death 66 years ago, yet agents are still probing as many as 20 other civil rights cold cases, including the police killings of 13 Black men in three Southern states decades ago.

The department is reviewing the killings of six men shot by police during a racial rebellion in Augusta, Georgia, in 1970, according to the agency's latest report to Congress. The city best known for hosting golf's Masters Tournament had been engulfed by riots after a Black teenager was beaten to death in the county jail.

The agency also is investigating the killings of seven other Black men involved in student protests in South Carolina, Mississippi and Louisiana during the societal upheaval of the late 1960s and early '70s. And investigators are looking at cases in which seven more individuals were killed, including a girl in Pennsylvania, the report showed.

Suspects were already tried and acquitted in some of these killings, making prosecution on the same charges all but impossible. Fading memories, lost evidence and the death of potential witnesses almost always pose problems in the quest for justice in decades-old cases.

Still, in Georgia, a leader of a group formed to tell the story of the "Augusta Six" — John Bennett, Sammie L. McCullough, Charlie Mack Murphy, James Stokes, Mack Wilson and William Wright Jr. — hopes some type of justice will prevail for the victims' families, even if it's not a criminal conviction.

"With the Justice Department's stamp on it, even a statement that the killings were wrongful would help even if there's no prosecutions. I think that would be very helpful for the community," said John Hayes of the 1970 Augusta Riot Observance Committee.

The Justice Department said Monday it had ended its investigation into the 1955 lynching of Till, the Black teenager from Chicago who was tortured, killed and thrown in a river in Mississippi after witnesses said he whistled at a white woman at a rural store. Two white men who were acquitted by all-white juries later confessed to the killing in a paid magazine interview, but both are dead and officials said no new charges were possible.

The Justice Department Cold Case Initiative began in 2006 and was formalized the following year under a law named for Till, whose slaying came to illustrate the depth and brutality of racial hatred in the Jim Crow South. Initially created to investigate other unresolved cases of the civil rights era, it was later expanded to include more recent cases, including killings that occurred in cities and on college campuses during demonstrations against the Vietnam War and racism.

In Augusta, as many as 3,000 people were estimated to have participated in protests and rioting that followed the death of 16-year-old Charles Oatman, who was beaten to death while being held in the jail. Frustration over his death and years of complaints over racial inequity erupted in unrest that left an estimated \$1 million in damage across a wide area.

Once the gunfire ended early on May 12, 1970, six Black men were dead from shots fired by police, authorities said. Two white officers were charged, one with killing John Stokes and the other with wounding another person, but both were acquitted by all- or mostly white juries.

Families are still grieving, Hayes said, but the killings generally aren't discussed much in Augusta.

"There's a lot of trauma there and things people don't want to bring up," said Hayes, whose group is in contact with relatives of half the victims.

The other police shootings under review were sparked by campus demonstrations amid simmering resentment over mistreatment of Black people.

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Three men were killed on Feb. 8, 1968, during protests to desegregate a bowling alley near South Carolina State College in Orangeburg, South Carolina. Nine state police officers were acquitted in what came to be known as the "Orangeburg Massacre," and a campus sports arena now honors the three victims, Samuel Hammond, Delano Middleton and Henry Smith.

Phillip Gibbs and James Earl Green were killed by police during a student demonstration at Jackson State University in Jackson, Mississippi, on May 15, 1970, and Leonard Brown and Denver Smith were gunned down during a protest at Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, on Nov. 16, 1972. No one was ever prosecuted for the killings in Jackson or Baton Rouge.

The seven other cases still under review by the Justice Department span the years 1959 through 1970 and involve individuals. The victims include 9-year-old Donna Reason, killed on May 18, 1970, when someone threw a Molotov cocktail into the home of her mixed-race family in Chester, Pennsylvania. No one was ever arrested.

Reeves is a member of the AP's Race and Ethnicity team.

Diplomatic boycotts, Peng case test IOC before Beijing Games

By GRAHAM DUNBAR AP Sports Writer

GENEVA (AP) — The president of the International Olympic Committee did his best to stay neutral Wednesday as Canada, Britain and Australia followed the United States in announcing diplomatic boycotts of the Winter Games in Beijing.

Thomas Bach, who has led the body through a series of problematic Olympic preparations since taking over in 2013, tried to spin the diplomatic snub into a positive by noting each country is allowing its athletes and teams to compete in Beijing.

"We have our full focus on the athletes," Bach said in an online news conference. "We welcome that they can participate, that they are supported by their national governments. The rest is politics."

Bach also praised himself for his video calls with tennis player Peng Shuai, a former Olympian from China who has mostly disappeared from public view since accusing a former top Communist Party official of sexually assaulting her.

The Beijing Games are set to open on Feb. 4, the second Olympics to be staged during the coronavirus pandemic. The Summer Olympics in Tokyo were held in July and August, a year later than originally planned.

The western allies announcing diplomatic boycotts are acting against China because of long-standing concerns about the country's human rights record, including the treatment of its Muslim minority Uyghur people. Many have called it genocide.

Bach, who was personally affected by the U.S.-led full boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics four years after winning a gold medal in team fencing with West Germany, dismissed the prospect of more diplomatic snubs damaging the upcoming Winter Games.

"You will hear the same comment from us for every political decision from any government," Bach said. "The integrity of the games are about the integrity of the sports competitions."

The situation surrounding Peng, however, has led to suspicions that the IOC is colluding with China. Peng's only known international contacts have been with IOC officials, including Bach in a 30-minute video call, while women's tennis players and officials have been excluded.

"Suspicious you can have always and about everything," said Bach, who has had several meetings and calls with Chinese leader Xi Jinping since Beijing was picked as host in 2015.

"The most important human right is the physical integrity," Bach said of Peng's safety, "and this physical integrity we have been ensuring during these calls and we will continue the calls and we will continue the support."

No video footage or transcripts of the calls have been provided by the IOC, fueling doubts that Peng could speak or travel freely. She also appeared briefly at children's tennis event in Beijing.

Despite those calls, the Women's Tennis Association said last week it was pulling its tournaments out

of China because of concern for Peng's safety.

Bach, who is set to meet Peng for dinner in Beijing in January, insisted the IOC's strategy of "quiet diplomacy" had so far achieved "what we could reasonably be expected to achieve."

Bach also said he was open to the possibility of having a trusted figure from tennis, such as Martina Navratilova, joining a call with Peng. But he said it was up to Peng to decide who was on the call.

"Why don't you respect Peng Shuai in this," Bach said, "and let her decide where her priorities are?"

More AP Winter Olympics: <https://apnews.com/hub/winter-olympics> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

Leaking California oil pipe's safeguards not fully working

By BRIAN MELLE and MATTHEW BROWN Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — The ruptured offshore pipeline that spilled tens of thousands of gallons of crude oil off the Southern California coast this fall did not have a fully functioning leak detection system at the time, according to a report obtained by The Associated Press.

The report was compiled by pipeline operator, Beta Offshore, a subsidiary of Houston-based Amplify Energy, and filed with federal regulators. It reveals Amplify is investigating whether personnel or control room issues contributed to the accident but does not explain what was wrong with the detection system.

The report, filed last week and released to the AP under a public records request, gives no new details on a possible anchor strike on the pipeline from a cargo ship suspected to be the cause of the roughly 25,000-gallon (112,000-liter) spill. Coast Guard investigators have said they suspect the pipeline began leaking long after it was snagged by the drifting cargo ship during strong winds in January.

It's not clear why it took so long for the 1/2-inch (1.25-centimeter) thick steel line to leak, or whether another anchor strike or other incident led to the rupture and spill. But experts say that a properly functioning leak detection system might have been able to catch that things were amiss before an oil sheen spotted on the surface led to the leak's discovery.

"The fact that they did not have the leak detection system working is surprising," University of Houston pipeline expert Ramanan Krishnamoorti said, noting that the company's accounting of the accident appeared inconsistent. "For experienced hands at this, when you've got a leak like this, you'd have seen signatures of it with pressure drops and flow rates."

The spill came ashore at Huntington Beach and forced about a weeklong closure of that city's beaches and others along the Orange County coast. Fishing in the affected area resumed only last week after testing confirmed fish did not have unsafe levels of oil toxins.

In its report, Beta said the pipeline's leak detection system, while not fully functional, still helped to detect and confirm the leak. Federal investigators have previously said a low-pressure alarm went off at 2:30 a.m. on Oct 2, indicating a possible failure.

But in its report the company says the leak wasn't discovered until 8 a.m. that day, by a third-party contractor who reported an offshore slick and notified personnel on a nearby Beta oil platform. The spill wasn't reported to authorities until more than an hour later.

Spokesperson Amy Conway with Amplify Energy declined to answer questions from AP about the leak detection system, citing the ongoing investigation.

"Amplify continues to remain committed to working with the regulatory agencies investigating this event," she said.

Accident reports filed with the U.S. Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration require companies to disclose the pressure of pipelines that fail. Beta said the line did not exceed maximum pressure but declined to answer what the pressure was when the line leaked. It said it would supplement its response when it determines the exact time the accident occurred.

The break in the pipe that runs along the sea floor 100 feet (30.5 meters) under water was less than one-hundredth of an inch wide (.2 millimeters) and more than 20 inches (50 centimeters) long, the report said. That means the line could have been leaking for hours or days, according to Krishnamoorti and a

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second expert, pipeline accident consultant Richard Kuprewicz.

"It isn't like a rupture that's wide open, but it's going to move some oil," Kuprewicz said. He added that the report leaves unresolved questions about the spill and the company's response.

"We don't know how their leak detection system is set up. People think we ought to be able to see a pressure loss, but sometimes pressure loss wouldn't show up even when you have big pipeline ruptures," he said.

As of Nov. 11, the cleanup from the spill had cost the company more than \$17 million. It also lost up to about \$45,000 in oil, based on an estimated 588 barrels lost at a price of \$76 each.

The damaged section of pipeline was expected to be removed under an order from pipeline safety officials that required a metallurgical analysis of why the line failed within 45 days of receiving the Oct. 4 order. However, that hasn't happened.

Amplify attorneys said in a civil lawsuit related to the spill that it is awaiting approval of a repair plan the company submitted to federal officials on Nov. 19.

Because a dive team that was to perform the work was called away by the U.S. Navy to the Persian Gulf, the earliest the repairs would happen would be Dec. 15, and next February is more likely, the company's attorneys said in a report to the federal court filed last week.

— Brown reported from Billings, Montana.

COVID cases spike even as US hits 200M vaccine milestone

By SOPHIA TAREEN and JENNIFER McDERMOTT Associated Press

PROVIDENCE, R.I. (AP) — The number of Americans fully vaccinated against COVID-19 reached 200 million Wednesday amid a dispiriting holiday-season spike in cases and hospitalizations that has hit even New England, one of the most highly inoculated corners of the country.

New cases in the U.S. climbed from an average of nearly 95,000 a day on Nov. 22 to almost 119,000 a day this week, and hospitalizations are up 25% from a month ago. The increases are due almost entirely to the delta variant, though the omicron mutation has been detected in about 20 states and is sure to spread even more.

Deaths are running close to 1,600 a day on average, back up to where they were in October. And the overall U.S. death toll less than two years into the crisis could hit another heartbreaking milestone, 800,000, in a matter of days.

The situation is not as dire as last year's holiday-season surge, before the public had access to COVID-19 vaccines, but the 60% of the U.S. population that is fully vaccinated has not been enough to prevent hot spots.

The cold weather, Thanksgiving gatherings and a big rebound in holiday travel are all believed to be playing a role, along with public weariness with pandemic restrictions.

Lawrence Gostin, director of the WHO Collaborating Center on Public Health Law and Human Rights at Georgetown University, likened the virus to a wildfire.

"You can clear a forest of the shrubbery. But if you leave some shrubs and trees standing, the fire will find them," Gostin said. "The virus will find you. It is searching for hosts that are not immune. The fact that you live in New England or New York doesn't insulate you."

Demand for the vaccine — with recent approval of boosters for all adults and shots for elementary school children — has been high amid the surge and the emergence of the omicron variant, whose dangers are still not fully understood. On Wednesday, Pfizer said that the initial two shots of its vaccine appear significantly less effective against omicron but that a booster dose may offer important protection.

Nearly 48 million people have received a booster, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. White House officials noted the U.S. administered 12.5 million shots last week, the highest weekly total since May.

"And that's critical progress as we head into the winter and confront the new omicron variant," White House coronavirus adviser Jeffrey Zients said.

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At the same time, some states, notably in highly vaccinated New England, but also in the Midwest, are grappling with some of the worst surges since the start of the pandemic. Hospitals are filling up and reacting by canceling non-urgent surgeries or taking other crisis measures, while states are strongly promoting boosters.

Despite one of the highest vaccination levels in the country — over 74% of the population fully vaccinated — Vermont is coping with its biggest surge yet. In the last week, new cases per day are up 54%, and the number of people in the hospital with COVID-19 has climbed 18%.

The virus is preying on those who haven't gotten their shots: As of Tuesday, 90% of the COVID-19 patients in intensive care were unvaccinated.

"Obviously, it's not where we want to be," Gov. Phil Scott said Tuesday, calling the situation "extremely frustrating."

More than 400 people were in the hospital with COVID-19 in New Hampshire at the start of the week, breaking the record set last winter.

New Hampshire Gov. Chris Sununu directed hospitals to set up COVID-19 "surge centers" using space normally reserved for such things as outpatient care.

"Every day for the next several weeks, we're likely to see a new high in COVID hospitalizations in New Hampshire," said Steve Ahnen, president of the New Hampshire Hospital Association. "With over 1,000 new cases a day, that number's not going to do anything but continue to go up."

Maine likewise is struggling with record-breaking COVID-19 hospitalizations. Gov. Janet Mills on Wednesday activated as many as 75 members of the National Guard to help out.

"The vast majority of patients in our hospitals are unvaccinated. That's especially true of critical care patients," said Andy Mueller, CEO of MaineHealth, the state's biggest health network. "It requires a tremendous amount of our resources to provide care."

Rhode Island's largest hospital system, Lifespan, said staffing shortages are at never-before-seen crisis levels, while Kent Hospital said it is near capacity and is considering delaying non-urgent procedures.

Dr. Paari Gopalakrishnan, Kent's interim president and chief operating officer, said the spike is probably due to "people letting their guards down" during the holidays, and flu season could complicate things further.

New Hampshire plans to hold a "booster blitz" on Saturday at 15 locations. Most appointments were booked.

In Berlin, Vermont, Mike Labounty got his booster Tuesday.

"I have friends that are in their 20s that are getting sick and friends that are 60 that are getting sick," he said. "The thing you see on Facebook and stuff like that is, 'I just want this to be over. I'm very sick,' so I'm just trying to avoid that."

Elsewhere around the country, Indiana has seen COVID-19 hospital admissions double in the last month and is approaching levels not seen since this time a year ago, before vaccines were widely available.

The number of people in intensive care in Minnesota has reached the highest level yet during the pandemic, with 98% of ICU beds occupied. Teams of military medics have been sent into Michigan and New Mexico.

Associated Press writers Kathy McCormack in Concord, New Hampshire; Patrick Whittle in Portland, Maine; and Wilson Ring and Lisa Rathke in Montpelier, Vermont, contributed to this report. Tareen reported from Chicago.

Biden: "Severe consequences" for Putin if he attacks Ukraine

By AAMER MADHANI, VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV and DASHA LITVINOVA Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — U.S. President Joe Biden said Wednesday that he warned Russian President Vladimir Putin that Moscow will face a severe economic pain if it tries to attack Ukraine, but promised prospective talks to address Russia's concerns about NATO's expansion.

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Biden said he was "very straightforward" with Putin during their call Tuesday, warning the Russian leader that he will pay a heavy price if he invades Ukraine.

"There were no minced words," Biden said at the White House before departing for Kansas City. "It was polite, but I made it very clear. If in fact he invades Ukraine, there will be severe consequences, severe consequences. Economic consequences like you've never seen. I am absolutely confident he got the message."

Asked by reporters if he'd ruled out U.S. troops on the ground to stop Russia, Biden said "that's not on the table," saying that a U.S. obligation to protect NATO allies if they come under attack doesn't extend to Ukraine, which is not in the Atlantic military alliance.

"The idea that the United States is going to unilaterally use force to confront Russia for invading Ukraine is not in the cards right now," Biden said.

At the same time, he said that the U.S., its allies and Russia could sit down for talks to discuss Moscow's grievances about NATO's expansion.

"We hope by Friday we're gonna be able to say, announce to you we're having meetings at a higher level, not just with us, but with at least four of our major NATO allies, and Russia to discuss the future of Russia's concern relative to NATO writ large and whether or not we could work out any accommodations as it relates to bringing down the temperature along the eastern front (in Ukraine)," Biden said.

Putin, for his part, promised that Moscow will submit its proposals for a security dialogue with the U.S. in a few days. He reaffirmed his denial of planning to attack Ukraine, but said that Moscow can't remain indifferent to NATO's possible expansion to its neighbor.

Putin, who entered Tuesday's call with Biden looking for Western guarantees precluding NATO's expansion to Ukraine, countered Western arguments that Russia has no say in the alliance expansion by arguing that security in Europe can only be mutual.

"Every country certainly has the right to choose the most acceptable way of ensuring its security, but it must be done in a way that doesn't infringe on the interests and undermine security of other countries, in this case Russia," Putin said. "Security must be global and equally cover everyone."

"We can't fail to be concerned about the prospect of Ukraine's accession to NATO, because that will undoubtedly lead to the deployment of military contingents, bases and weapons that would threaten us," he told reporters after talks in Sochi with visiting Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis.

He described the two-hour conversation with Biden as "very open, specific and, I would say constructive," adding that he and Biden have agreed to ask experts to conduct talks on security in Europe.

"Russia will prepare its arguments literally in a few days, within a week, and we will submit it to the American side for consideration," he said.

"We proceed from the assumption that this time are concerns will be heard," he said, noting that the West ignored Moscow's complaints in the past about NATO's expansion eastward to incorporate former Soviet allies in Central and Eastern Europe and former Soviet republics in the Baltics.

Asked Wednesday if Russia was going to attack Ukraine, Putin called the question provocative, saying that "Russia is conducting a peaceful foreign policy, but it has the right to ensure its security in the mid- and long-term perspective."

The leader-to-leader conversation — Biden speaking from the White House Situation Room, Putin from his residence in Sochi — was one of the most important of Biden's presidency and came at a perilous time.

U.S. intelligence officials have determined that Russia has moved 70,000 troops near the Ukraine border and has made preparations for a possible invasion early next year. Moscow has denied any plans to attack Ukraine, rejecting Western concerns as part of a campaign to smear Russia.

White House officials made clear that Biden is not interested in putting U.S. troops in harm's way defending Ukraine. But U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan noted that Biden said the U.S. would also "provide additional defensive material to the Ukrainians ... and we would fortify our NATO allies on the eastern flank with additional capabilities in response to such an escalation."

Sullivan said the U.S. believes that Putin hasn't yet made a final decision to invade. Biden was vice president in 2014 when Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula and backed an insurgency in eastern

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Ukraine, which has killed more than 14,000 people and is still an active conflict.

Putin's foreign affairs adviser Yuri Ushakov told reporters that Putin countered Biden's expressions of concern about the Russian troop buildup near Ukraine by snapping: "You Americans are worried about Russian battalions on Russian territory thousands of miles away from the United States, while we are really worried about our security."

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Wednesday that "it was positive that the U.S. president spoke to the Russian president," adding that he would comment in detail on Thursday, after his own phone call with Biden.

With no immediate breakthrough on the Ukraine question, the U.S. emphasized a need for diplomacy and de-escalation, while issuing stern threats to Russia about the high costs of a military incursion.

A top U.S. envoy, Victoria Nuland, warned that a Russian invasion of Ukraine would also jeopardize a controversial pipeline between Russia and Germany known as Nord Stream 2, which is not yet operating.

Asked by Welt television if he would be prepared to use the pipeline to pressure Russia, new German Chancellor Olaf Scholz replied "we have a very clear position: we want the inviolability of borders to be respected by all."

"Everyone understands that there would be consequences if that weren't the case, but what matters now is to do everything so that it stays this way, that they aren't violated," Scholz said.

Madhani reported from Washington. Geir Moulson in Berlin, Robert Burns, Zeke Miller and Nomaan Merchant in Washington, contributed to this report.

Giant Christmas tree outside Fox News headquarters set afire

NEW YORK (AP) — A man was charged with arson and other crimes Wednesday for setting fire to a 50-foot (15-meter) Christmas tree in front of Fox News headquarters in midtown Manhattan, police said.

The artificial tree outside of the News Corp. building that houses Fox News, The Wall Street Journal and the New York Post caught fire shortly after midnight, police said.

Photos and videos from the scene show the fully decorated tree going up in flames.

Fox News host Shannon Bream announced the fire to viewers as firefighters were working to put it out.

"This is the Fox Square in New York, outside of Fox headquarters," Bream said. "It appears that our giant Christmas tree there, just a couple of minutes ago, was completely engulfed in flames."

Firefighters extinguished the flames, and no injuries were reported.

A 49-year-old man who police said was homeless was arrested on charges including criminal mischief, arson and trespassing. It wasn't clear if he had an attorney who could comment on the charges.

Police said the man had a lighter, but it was unclear whether any accelerant was used.

The tree had been ceremonially lit during a network Christmas special on Sunday. Its charred remains were being dismantled Wednesday.

"We will not let this deliberate and brazen act of cowardice deter us," FOX News Media CEO Suzanne Scott told network staffers in a memo. Scott said a new tree would be installed "as a message that there can be peace, light and joy even during a dark moment like this."

A lighting ceremony will be held for the new tree, Scott said.

\$56K Alzheimer's drug avoiding Biden's cost curbs, for now

By RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A new \$56,000-a-year Alzheimer's medication that's leading to one of the biggest increases ever in Medicare premiums is highlighting the limitations of President Joe Biden's strategy for curbing prescription drug costs.

The medication known as Aduhelm would be protected from Medicare price negotiations for more than a decade under the Democratic drug pricing compromise before Congress, part of Biden's social agenda legislation. That's because the bill doesn't allow Medicare to negotiate over newly launched drugs, pro-

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viding a window for drugmakers to recoup investments in research and development. Biologics such as Aduhelm get 13 years of protection.

Seniors soon will be paying higher premiums so Medicare can set aside a contingency fund to cover Aduhelm, which is made by the pharmaceutical company Biogen. It's the first Alzheimer's medication in nearly 20 years. But its benefits have been widely questioned.

Leading Democrats say their party cannot afford such optics when it's scrambling to deliver prescription drug savings. The Democrats' social agenda bill would cap the cost of insulin at \$35 a month, limit annual price increases for medications and shield Medicare recipients from high out-of-pocket costs.

If the legislation passes, those changes would take several years to fully phase in. The Medicare premium increase, however, is coming soon — at the start of an election year.

Medicare's Part B premium for outpatient care will jump by \$21.60 a month in 2022, to \$170.10, the largest dollar increase ever although not percentage-wise. About \$11 of that would be due to Aduhelm.

"Seniors should not have to pay a surcharge on their premiums whenever a drug company decides to set an astronomical price on their products," Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., said in a statement to The Associated Press. "I'm prepared to act to protect seniors' pocketbooks, and I am encouraging Medicare to explore all available options to course-correct." Wyden heads the Senate Finance Committee, which oversees Medicare, and he's a key player in drug pricing legislation.

Sen. Bernie Sanders, a Vermont independent, has summed it up succinctly: "With Democrats in control of the White House, the House and the Senate we cannot let that happen," he wrote Biden last week, urging the president to stop the part of the Medicare premium increase attributable to Aduhelm.

White House officials say they are well aware of the concerns and are dealing directly with Sanders. But Biden made no mention this week of Aduhelm when he promoted the drug pricing provisions in his \$2 trillion legislation.

Usually the financial impact of high-cost drugs falls most directly on patients with serious diseases such as cancer, rheumatoid arthritis or multiple sclerosis. But with Aduhelm, the financial pain is being spread among Medicare recipients generally, not just Alzheimer's patients needing the drug.

"This is the poster child drug for showing how one medication can have a high impact on premiums and costs incurred by people on Medicare, not just those who are taking that drug," said Tricia Neuman, a Medicare expert with the nonpartisan Kaiser Family Foundation. "This is not a hypothetical question: 'Do drug prices impact premiums?' This is a case closed."

Biogen says it priced Aduhelm fairly after taking into account payments for other innovative drugs aimed at hard-to-treat diseases. Alzheimer's is a degenerative neurological disease with no known cure. It affects some 6 million Americans, most of them older people eligible for Medicare.

In approving Aduhelm, the Food and Drug Administration determined that the drug's ability to reduce clumps of plaque in the brain is likely to slow dementia. But experts including the FDA's own outside advisers objected, saying that benefit has not been clearly demonstrated. A nonprofit think tank focused on drug pricing estimated Aduhelm's value at between \$3,000 and \$8,400 per year, not \$56,000, based on its unproven benefits.

Medicare is considering requests to pay for Aduhelm on a case-by-case basis, pending a broader coverage determination that's not expected for months. The reason Aduhelm would add to the cost of Medicare's Part B outpatient coverage is that it's administered intravenously in a doctor's office.

Sanders is asking that Medicare delay its coverage approval until there is scientific consensus that the drug is safe and effective. He is also urging Biden, through executive action, to reinstate a government policy that drugmakers charge "reasonable prices" for treatments that receive federal funding.

Two House committees are investigating the FDA's approval of Aduhelm. The Health and Human Services inspector general is conducting its own review.

Supporters of the Democratic drug pricing legislation are mostly staying quiet about the controversy. But some say they would have preferred an earlier version of the legislation that applied Medicare negotiations to new drugs as well. Echoing pharmaceutical industry arguments, a few Democratic lawmakers

feared that would go too far. Their opposition almost killed the Democrats' drug pricing plan, and in the end led to a compromise limiting Medicare negotiations.

"This is a long fight and you've got to take the long view, especially when you are trying to overcome one of the most powerful lobbies in the world," said David Mitchell, founder of the advocacy group Patients for Affordable Drugs. "I believe that the issue of launch prices will force itself upon us in the years ahead because we don't have unlimited resources."

Pfizer says COVID booster offers protection against omicron

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

Pfizer said Wednesday that a booster of its COVID-19 vaccine may offer important protection against the new omicron variant even though the initial two doses appear significantly less effective.

Pfizer and its partner BioNTech said that while two doses may not be strong enough to prevent infection, lab tests showed a booster increased by 25-fold people's levels of antibodies capable of fighting off omicron. For people who haven't yet had a booster, the companies said two doses still should prevent severe disease or death.

Health authorities in the U.S. and other countries have urged eligible people to get a third dose even before these results.

"Go and get your third boost as soon as possible," Dr. Mikael Dolsten, Pfizer's chief scientific officer, told The Associated Press. "This is comforting and a very positive message that we now have a plan that will induce immunity that is likely to protect from infection, symptomatic illness and severe disease from now across the entire winter season."

President Joe Biden said the Pfizer booster finding is "very encouraging" although he cautioned, "that's the lab report. There's more studies going on."

Pfizer and BioNTech tested blood samples taken a month after a booster and found people harbored levels of omicron-neutralizing antibodies that were similar to amounts proven protective against earlier variants after two doses. For the lab tests, researchers grew samples of so-called "pseudoviruses" that hold the worrisome new mutations.

Scientists don't yet know how big a threat the omicron variant really is. Currently the extra-contagious delta variant is responsible for most of the COVID-19 cases in the U.S. and other countries.

But the omicron variant, discovered late last month, carries an unusually large number of mutations and scientists are racing to learn how easily it spreads, whether it causes illness that is more serious or milder than other coronavirus types — and how much it might evade the protection of prior vaccinations.

Pfizer's findings, announced in a press release, are preliminary and haven't yet undergone scientific review. But they're the first from a vaccine maker examining whether the booster doses that health authorities are urging people to get may indeed make a key difference.

Moderna and Johnson & Johnson also are testing how their vaccines may hold up, but health authorities will be closely watching for real-world evidence of how omicron spreads in highly vaccinated populations.

If it becomes dominant and causes serious illness, then regulators will have to decide whether vaccines should be tweaked to better match omicron — changes to the recipe that manufacturers already are beginning, just in case.

Scientists have speculated that the high jump in antibodies that comes with a third dose of current COVID-19 vaccines might be enough to counter any decrease in effectiveness.

Despite the large number of mutations that omicron bears, "it is still not a complete escape variant, it is a partial escape variant," BioNTech CEO Ugur Sahin said in a press conference.

Antibody levels predict how well a vaccine may prevent infection with the coronavirus but they are just one layer of the immune system's defenses. Pfizer said two doses of the vaccine should still protect against severe disease, because omicron's mutations don't appear to hamper another defense — T cells that fight the virus after infection sets in.

A small lab study in South Africa also concluded people may be more susceptible to breakthrough omi-

cron infections after just two Pfizer doses. Scientists from the Africa Health Research Institute in Durban found a sharp drop in antibody strength against omicron compared to other variants — although they didn't test boosters. Pfizer boosters aren't yet available in South Africa, but health care workers are being offered extra doses of the single-shot J&J vaccine.

The preliminary South African results suggested people vaccinated after an earlier bout of COVID-19 retained more protection — reflecting that initial shots are known to trigger a huge antibody jump after prior infection.

Even if there are more breakthrough infections after two doses, most experts believe vaccines will still work against the omicron variant because of the other immune defenses they trigger, said Willem Hanekom, a co-author of the South African study.

"The more antibodies you can have on board, the better you will do, at least in these lab experiments," Hanekom said. "So booster vaccines might be very important."

A U.S. expert agreed the preliminary booster findings are encouraging although more information is needed.

But if omicron winds up causing severe disease and becomes common globally, "it may be much better addressed through vaccines that are adjusted to specifically protect against that variant," said Dr. Jesse Goodman of Georgetown University, a former Food and Drug Administration vaccine chief.

Vaccine makers already are tweaking their vaccine recipes to create an omicron-specific dose in case it's needed. Pfizer predicted its candidate could be ready for regulators to consider in March.

Associated Press journalists Andrew Meldrum and Frank Jordans contributed to this report.

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Woods to make return from car crash at PNC Championship

By DOUG FERGUSON AP Golf Writer

Ten months after his right leg was badly damaged in a car crash, Tiger Woods is returning to competition next week with 12-year-old son Charlie in the PNC Championship.

"Although it's been a long and challenging year, I am very excited to close it out by competing in the PNC Championship with my son Charlie," Woods tweeted. "I'm playing as a Dad and couldn't be more excited and proud."

It will be his first competition, even in a tournament Woods described last week as the "hit-and-giggle" variety that he can play, since he and his son tied for seventh a year ago in the unofficial event that pairs family members.

The tournament was holding a spot for Woods, and he fueled speculation he might play the Dec. 18-19 event at the Ritz Carlton Golf Club Orlando when he took full swings with driver on Saturday and Sunday during his Hero World Challenge in the Bahamas.

"We have been liaising with Tiger and his team for some time and are delighted that he has now decided to make his return to competitive golf at the PNC Championship," said Alastair Johnston of IMG, the executive chairman of the event.

Woods was driving to a Los Angeles course for a television shoot on Feb. 23 when police say he was driving about 85 mph along a winding, coastal suburban road. The SUV crashed through a median and plunged down a hill.

Doctors said he shattered the tibia and fibula bones in his right leg in multiple locations. Those were stabilized by a rod in the tibia. A combination of screws and pins were used to stabilize additional injuries in the ankle and foot.

Woods said last week that amputation was considered. He declined to discuss specifics of the crash, saying only "you can read about all that there in the police report."

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The PNC Championship was formerly known as the Father-Son Challenge until it changed the title to be more inclusive of family members. For the first time in its 24 years, the tournament has a current No. 1 player in the field, Nelly Korda, who will be playing with her father Petr, a former Australian Open tennis champion.

Lee Trevino is playing again and has never missed the tournament since it began in 1995. Justin Thomas returns as the defending champion with his father, Mike, a longtime PGA professional.

Still, this becomes all about Woods inside the ropes, hitting shots that count toward a score. A year ago, it was his last event before a fifth back surgery, not as serious as the previous ones. Toward the end of the second round, he was not hitting some tee shots because his son played from a forward tee and was getting it out there farther than Woods could have hit it.

Fans are returning to the Florida course, and it already is close to a sellout because organizers limit ticket sales to preserve the intimate nature of the event.

The next question will be when Woods, who shares the career PGA Tour record with 82 victories, will play in an official event.

He had said last week that was a long way off, dousing hopes of a return by suggesting his leg wouldn't allow him to practice as much, he was at peace with that and "I've made the climb enough times." He also said he hadn't reached a point of deciding whether to complete a full comeback from his latest injuries.

"I'll play a round here or there, a little hit and giggle, I can do something like that," he said. "To see some of my shots fall out of the sky a lot shorter than they used to is a little eye-opening, but at least I'm able to do it again. That's something that for a while there it didn't look like I was going to. Now I'm able to participate in the sport of golf.

"Now, to what level? I do not know that."

The first level is with his son at his side in a 36-hole event where he doesn't have to hit every shot and can ride in a cart. But the score will count, and that hasn't happened since the PNC Championship last year.

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

Father's Nazi past haunts Chilean presidential frontrunner

By FRANK JORDANS and JOSHUA GOODMAN Associated Press Writers

BERLIN (AP) — The German-born father of Chilean presidential frontrunner José Antonio Kast was a member of Adolf Hitler's Nazi party, according to a recently unearthed document obtained by The Associated Press, revelations that appear at odds with the far-right candidate's own statements about his father's military service during World War II.

German officials confirmed this week that an ID card in the country's Federal Archive shows that an 18-year-old named Michael Kast joined the National Socialist German Workers' Party, or NSDAP, on Sept. 1, 1942, at the height of Hitler's war on the Soviet Union.

While the Federal Archive couldn't confirm whether Kast was the presidential contender's father, the date and place of birth listed on the card matches that of Kast's father, who died in 2014. A copy of the ID card, identified with the membership number 9271831, was previously posted on social media on Dec. 1 by Chilean journalist Mauricio Weibel.

The ID card's emergence adds a new twist to a highly charged presidential runoff billed on both side as a battle of extremes — between communism and right-wing authoritarianism — and marked by a steady flow of disinformation that has distorted the record and campaign pledges of Kast's opponent.

Kast, 55, from the newly formed Republican Party, led the first round of Chile's presidential election last month, two points ahead of leftist lawmaker Gabriel Boric, who he now will face in the Dec. 19 runoff.

A fervent Roman Catholic and father of nine, Kast's family has deep ties to the military dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet that came to power following a coup in 1973. His brother, Miguel Kast, served as the dictator's central bank president.

"If he were alive, he would have voted for me," Kast said of Pinochet during the 2017 campaign, in which

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he won just 8% of the vote. "We would have had tea together" in the presidential palace.

On the campaign trail this year, he has emphasized conservative family values, attacked migrants from Haiti and Venezuela he blames for crime and blasted Boric as a puppet of Chile's communists.

He's made inroads with middle class voters concerned that Boric — a millennial former student protest leader — would disrupt three decades of economic and political stability that has made Chile the envy of many in Latin America. To underscore those concerns, Kast traveled last week to Washington and met with American investors as well as Sen. Marco Rubio, the top Republican on the subcommittee overseeing U.S. relations with Latin America.

Some of his more radical supporters have also launched an online scare campaign involving a fake tweet from leftist Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, false allegations that migrants are manning voting booths and a made-up medical report after Kast in a debate urged Boric to take a drug test.

The latest opinion polls give a slight edge in the runoff to Boric, who has pivoted to the center to galvanize support from voters fearful of a return to the country's tumultuous past.

"This backs up Boric's framing of the race as a dichotomy between fascism and democracy," Jennifer Pribble, a Chile expert at the University of Richmond, said of the older Kast's wartime record. "To the extent Kast seems to be hiding some element of his family's history, it plays into that narrative."

It's unclear if Kast was aware of his father's NSDAP membership card. Carolina Araya, a spokeswoman for Kast's campaign, wouldn't comment when asked repeatedly by the AP.

But in the past Kast has angrily rejected claims that his father was a supporter of the Nazi movement, describing him instead as a forced conscript in the German army.

"Why do you use the adjective Nazi?" he said in 2018 TV appearance in which he said he was proud of his father and accused a prominent Chilean journalist of trying to spread lies.

"When there is a war and (military) enrollment is mandatory, a 17 or 18 year old doesn't have the option to say, 'I'm not going,' because they will be court martialed and shot to death the very next day," he said later that year in comments posted on his social media account.

There is no evidence Kast had a role in wartime atrocities such as the attempt to exterminate Europe's Jews. But while military service was compulsory, membership in the Nazi party was voluntary.

Some Germans enthusiastically joined the party while others did so believing it would bring advantages in a society where large parts of public life were expected to fall in line with Nazi ideology from 1933 onward.

"We don't have a single example of anyone who was forced to enter the party," said Armin Nolzen, a German historian who has extensively researched the issue of NSDAP membership.

Kast joined the party in 1942 within five months of turning 18 — the minimum age required for membership. He likely was a member of the Hitler Youth for at least four years before joining the party and would have been recommended by the district leader, Nolzen said. In all, the party had 7.1 million members that year — about one-tenth of the population.

Michael Buddrus of the Leibniz Institute for Contemporary History in Berlin cautioned against overestimating the significance of NSDAP membership in people that young, but agreed that Kast must have joined of his own volition.

Given that Kast entered the military soon after, Buddrus said it was possible the teenager had never actively participated in a party gathering or paid dues.

"If you're a party member, you're a party member," said Richard F. Wetzell, a research fellow at the German Historical Institute in Washington. "Being a party member does bind you to the party and its ideology even though many may have joined for purely opportunistic reasons."

A 2015 book about Pinochet's civilian collaborators written by Chilean journalist Javier Rebolledo claimed that the older Kast was at first reluctant to join the Nazi party. But he was persuaded by a sergeant to do so as he was being deployed to the Crimean Peninsula, according to Rebolledo's book, which cites a memoir by Kast's wife.

The war at the time was dominated by the Battle of Stalingrad, a turning point for Nazi Germany's assault on the Soviet Union that resulted in some 2 million deaths and the local surrender of Axis forces a

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few months later.

As the war was ending, Kast, then serving in Italy, obtained a false ID indicating he was a member of the International Committee of the Red Cross, according to Rebolledo.

After twice escaping arrest at the hands of the Allied forces, he returned to Germany and was discovered during the postwar period of denazification. But when he confessed his deceit, a sympathetic prosecutor took pity and in recognition of his honesty burned his army record, according to Rebolledo's book.

The younger Kast has accused the Chilean journalist of taking his mother's memoir out of context and distorting facts to attribute sinister motives to his father's wartime activities.

Whatever his record, Kast migrated to Chile in 1950, followed a year later by his wife and oldest two children, and established himself in Paine, a rural community south of the capital of Santiago. Eventually, the couple built a small business selling cold cuts from a roadside kiosk into a nationwide chain of restaurants and manufacturer of packaged food.

A 1995 law passed by Chile's congress granting the older Kast citizenship highlights his deep Catholic roots and "grand spirit of social justice" that translated into his role helping build five chapels, hospitals and a youth center as well as providing employees of his company, Cecinas Bavaria, with the means to buy their own homes.

But there was a darker side to the clan's success.

According to Rebolledo, leftist agitators and peasants had threatened to expropriate the family's business during the socialist administration of Salvador Allende. The day after Pinochet's coup against Allende, police in Paine mopped up, disappearing in broad daylight a young militant, Pedro Vargas, who had been organizing workers at Bavaria, as he waited in line to buy bread.

The candidate's brother, Christian Kast, testified that as a 16-year-old in the immediate aftermath of the coup, he had delivered food to the town's police and spent the night with them. He told investigators probing Vargas' disappearance that the next day he attended a barbecue at the police station and saw a dozen detainees — but not Vargas — hauled away, their heads shaven, never to be seen again.

With Vargas missing, a member of his family went in anguish to appeal for aid from Michael Kast.

"I thought he was going to help," the person told the AP on the condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation nearly five decades on. "But he told me to go home, that there was a war going on and it was a matter of life and death. I couldn't believe it."

Today, just a few miles from where the presidential hopeful lives, symbols of the passions that filled Vargas' shortened life — a book, a scale of justice, a photo of his dog — decorate one of 70 mosaics paying tribute to each of the victims stolen from the bucolic town that has the distinction of having suffered the most disappearances per capita in all of Chile.

Goodman reported from Miami. AP Writers Patricia Luna and Eva Vergara in Santiago, Chile contributed to this report.

Barred from priesthood, some Catholic women find other roles

By CLAIRE GIANGRAVÉ of Religion News Service and DAVID CRARY of The Associated Press
ROME (AP) — Women aspiring to leadership in the Catholic church have long come to terms with the glass ceiling that exists in the male-dominated institution, but Pope Francis' spate of female appointments in the Vatican hierarchy suggests that change, however modest, is underway.

A growing number of women hold consequential positions in the church and at the Vatican. But it's the roles women occupy at the grassroots level — in parishes, dioceses and universities — that suggest to female Catholics that despite the institution's slowness to change, women are taking the lead, making new demands and inspiring new perspectives.

Nuns in the United States have been among those setting the pace. Several of them have played prominent roles in social justice activism; two others have been the recent leaders of the Catholic church's vast network of hospitals and health centers.

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Women cannot be ordained and become priests, bishops or popes in the Catholic church. It teaches that because Jesus selected only men as apostles, only men can lead the church and perform the sacraments.

This story is part of a series by The Associated Press and Religion News Service on women's roles in male-led religions.

What's new is that female empowerment is "more and more an issue carried also by men, including priests, bishops and cardinals. Even the pope," said Sister Nathalie Becquart, the first woman appointed undersecretary of the Synod of Bishops.

This important post, assigned to Becquart by the pope in February, was previously held only by bishops. She coordinates preparations for the summits of bishops at the Vatican called synods.

While synods have always been an exclusively male forum for clergy to discuss the church's pressing issues, under Francis they have become a steppingstone for women. Sister Alessandra Smerilli, an Italian economist, was appointed councilor of the 2015 synod on youth before she rose in the ranks.

This year, Francis appointed a biblical scholar, Sister Nuria Caldich-Benages, as secretary of the Pontifical Biblical Commission. On Nov. 4, he chose Sister Raffaella Petrini to be secretary general of the governorship of Vatican City, making her the highest-ranking woman in the Catholic city-state.

The first woman appointed to a Vatican congregation was Sister Luzia Premoli, a nun from Brazil. She says her 2014 appointment by Francis to the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples demonstrated his commitment to include more women as decision-makers.

Premoli joined the Comboni Missionary Sisters at 23, rising to be a superior general overseeing missionaries in numerous African countries.

Speaking by telephone from her missionary post in the Central African Republic, Premoli said her Vatican appointment was slow to come about because of a "mentality within the church" that disapproves of women in top positions.

"But for Jesus it was different," she said. "He invited women to follow him."

The injection of women into Vatican positions of authority is already changing perspectives, Becquart says.

After she was elevated by the pope, Becquart lived for six months at a home for clergy close to St. Peter's Square. The priests initially were hesitant, but after a few shared meals and conversations they got used to the new arrival. "Now they tell me, 'We miss you. Come back!'" she said.

Worldwide, a growing number of women serve as chancellors in dioceses and as members of bishop's councils. In January, Francis changed canon law to allow women to be lectors and acolytes, giving official recognition to female service during Mass.

In the United States recently, some of the most prominent women on the Catholic stage have been nuns engaged in social activism. They include Sister Helen Prejean, whose campaigning against the death penalty was featured in the film "Dead Man Walking"; Sister Norma Pimentel, renown for advocacy on behalf of migrants along the U.S.-Mexico border, and Sister Simone Campbell, who led cross-country "Nuns on the Bus" trips highlighting issues of economic and social injustice.

Among the nuns with clout is Sister Mary Haddad, who has served since 2019 as president of the Catholic Health Association of the United States. Its network of hospitals, health centers and long-term care facilities is the nation's largest group of nonprofit health providers.

In high school, Haddad focused on sports, not a possible career in Catholic organizations, and went to Southern Illinois University with a field hockey scholarship.

A leadership opportunity arrived quickly. At 22, with a newly earned bachelor's degree in education, Haddad became a substitute teacher at a Catholic school in her hometown, Gillespie, Illinois. The parish priest was so impressed that, within two months, he asked her to become the principal.

"I remember clearly thinking I'm not qualified — but if he feels I have what it takes, I'm going to do it," she said. "That was my first entree into church leadership."

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Haddad subsequently earned two master's degrees and joined the Sisters of Mercy of America, working in health care, social services and education in the U.S., Trinidad and Tobago, and Belize.

While joining the order, Haddad sometimes talked with another novice who resented the ban on women's ordination and yearned to be a priest. Haddad says she never shared that frustration.

"People ask me what it's like being a woman in a male-dominated church, thinking I must feel subservient, but I don't feel that way," she said. "I've been afforded opportunities to demonstrate my abilities to serve God's church."

"My father died in car crash when I was 3, and I saw my mother taking on his roles — she did it all," Haddad added. "There's nothing a man can do that a woman can't."

Among the lay women reaching positions of power in U.S. Catholicism is Carolyn Woo, who was dean of the University of Notre Dame's business school for 14 years before serving as president and CEO of Catholic Relief Services from 2012 to 2016. CRS provides humanitarian aid in over 100 countries, spending more than \$900 million a year.

Woo is not eager to debate women's ordination. That argument "has taken up every ounce of oxygen," she says.

Instead, in face-to-face conversations and an upcoming book, Woo insists there are rewarding options for women beyond the priesthood.

"When I meet with young women, there's an undertone of 'Women really don't have much influence,'" she said. "It takes time to engage, to explain, 'No, there are a lot of opportunities for women to lead.'"

In 2016, Francis created a commission to study the possibility of women deacons, who can preside over services except for Mass and cannot perform sacraments. In 2019, Francis said the commission's report didn't provide a "definitive response" and launched a new study that is unfinished.

"It's all part of an effort to postpone so as not to address the problem," said Lucetta Scaraffia, a history professor at the Sapienza University of Rome. In 2012, Scaraffia was appointed by Pope Benedict XVI to run "Women Church World," a magazine published alongside the Vatican newspaper L'Osservatore Romano.

In 2019 she and many of her reporters resigned after publishing articles on the servitude and sexual abuse of religious sisters by clergy. Scaraffia says the Vatican hierarchy forced the resignations by applying a tight noose around the publication.

Scaraffia is nuanced in discussing female ordination. "I think that women should have authority in Vatican and church departments as normal women, as lay women, who see things differently," she said.

Scaraffia believes the Vatican's recent female appointments are "important from a symbolic and public image perspective." But reflecting her own experience, she says these women "chosen by the ecclesial hierarchy, competent but obedient, don't have a real chance to interfere with the Church's decisions."

Instead, she says Pope Francis should appoint members of the International Union of Superiors General, which represents more than 600,000 religious sisters worldwide, to serve on the Council of Cardinals, a group of prelates handpicked by the pope as advisers.

The cultural pressure needed for the Catholic Church and Vatican to empower more women can only come from the outside, Scaraffia said.

"The church is not changing — the women in the church are changing," she said, "including religious sisters who were quiet and obedient for a long time. Now they are no longer silent and obedient. Now they are coming forward with their requests, their projects, their identity."

Crary reported from New York.

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Afghans wait and worry at US bases after frantic evacuation

By BEN FOX Associated Press

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JOINT BASE MCGUIRE-DIX-LAKEHURST, N.J. (AP) — The former interpreter for the U.S. Army counts himself among the lucky as an Afghan who managed to make it through frantic crowds outside the Kabul airport to board a military evacuation flight out of the country with little more than the clothes on his back.

Esrar Ahmad Saber now waits, along with 11,000 other Afghans, from the safety of a U.S. base in central New Jersey, while worrying about family members left behind and enduring a prolonged resettlement process.

Saber has been at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst in central New Jersey since Aug. 26 as has nearly everyone else at one of the three "villages" set up there for refugees. "They want to go to their new homes and start their new lives," the 29-year-old said. "They are really excited about it. But the fact is, the process is very slow."

The slow pace has become a defining characteristic of Operation Allies Welcome, the largest U.S. refugee resettlement effort in decades, which follows the Aug. 30 withdrawal of troops from the country and an end to America's longest war. Even as Afghans still arrive, thousands remain in limbo, anxious about their future as they fearfully follow the news of Taliban reprisals and economic collapse back in their homeland.

Operation Allies Welcome reached a milestone this week as the number resettled in American communities — 37,000 — surpassed the 35,000 at six bases around the country. But people involved with the effort readily concede it's been a challenge for a number of reasons, including a scarcity of affordable housing, cutbacks to refugee programs under President Donald Trump as well as the sheer number of refugees.

"It's been a shock to the system because we just haven't had this many people arrive at the same time in a really, really long period," said Erol Kekic, a senior vice president with Church World Service, one of nine national resettlement agencies working with the government in what is formally known as Operation Allies Welcome.

The resettlement organizations and the Department of Homeland Security, the lead federal agency in the effort, are working toward a goal of having everyone off the bases by Feb. 15. The New Jersey installation now hosts the largest number, down from a high of 14,500, followed by Fort McCoy in Wisconsin with 7,500.

There are 3,200 more at overseas transit points awaiting flights to the U.S. as well as some still making it out of Afghanistan.

"I feel pretty good about our chances of moving everybody off the base before that day," Kekic said. "Whether or not we get there by Feb. 15, I think remains to be seen."

The government last week conducted a guided tour for journalists of the New Jersey installation, where refugees stay in brick buildings previously used as barracks or in sprawling tent-like prefabricated structures.

There are fields for soccer, courts for basketball and cavernous warehouses where refugees receive clothes and other supplies. There are also classrooms for the children, who make up about 40% of the population, as well as language lessons and job training for adults and a medical clinic.

Afghans staying at the base go through immigration processing as well as health screening and vaccinations, including for COVID-19. More than 100 babies have been born to women at the base.

Saber, who came from Afghanistan by himself and left a brother and sister behind, says the refugees are happy, just eager to move on. "It's a dream to be here," he said. "They just want to get out as soon as possible."

Among the refugees are new arrivals as well. Ghulam Eshan Sharifi, a microbiologist, came on Nov. 14 with his wife and two children after 23 days in Qatar. He was relieved but worried about his adult daughters back in Kabul who held government jobs before the Taliban returned.

"They have no jobs now. They cannot even go outside so we are obviously afraid about what will happen to them," Sharifi said. "We are hoping that God will solve the problem."

He said he hopes to settle in the Denver area but does not yet know when, or if, that will happen. "This is just the beginning for us," he added.

Many refugees are also recovering from what was for many a traumatic escape from a country that collapsed much more quickly than the U.S. government, at least publicly, anticipated.

"Most, if not all of them have worked with our forces and they have been part of the U.S. effort in

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some way," said Air Force Col. Soleiman Rahel, who came to the U.S. with his family as a refugee from Afghanistan when he was a teenager and is on a temporary assignment working with the refugees at the base. "So, it's very traumatic. It's very hard for them."

Rahel said he can appreciate the challenges the new arrivals will face since his own parents confronted similar ones, including being forced to take lower-level jobs than they were accustomed to back in Afghanistan so they could support their family and the kids could go to school.

He also can understand why so many of the refugees want to move to areas where there are established Afghan communities — particularly Northern California, the Washington, D.C., area and Houston — even though those requests are straining resettlement efforts there and contributing to the delays.

"That's natural, because we always gravitate towards our culture toward people who can help you," Rahel said. "But we try to give them some comfort that regardless of where they go, American society is such a forgiving and giving society that people will be there to help them out."

Given the extent of the challenge, the agencies have enlisted help beyond groups that typically work with refugees, including veterans groups and even local sports clubs to sponsor families to help them get situated. Resettlement officials say it might have been easier if the entire process had been shifted to a U.S. territory such as Guam, which has been used for that purpose in the past, or if there had been more time to prepare in advance for their arrival.

"This thing should have been planned before they announced the withdrawal. Right? So in that sense, it is taking longer than it should," Mark Hetfield, president of HIAS, another of the nine resettlement organizations, said. "But considering they decided to plan for this after they made the decision to withdraw, given the depletion of the capacity of the U.S. refugee program over the last four years, none of this is surprising."

While refugees receive temporary assistance after being resettled, most are expected to achieve self-sufficiency. That proves to be difficult when many don't speak English well, have academic credentials that won't be recognized in the U.S. and lack the job and credit history needed.

Saber said he hopes his experience as a military interpreter will allow him to join the Army. He recently learned that he would be getting resettled in Phoenix, but has no idea when he'll leave. "I'm just waiting for a flight."

India's military chief, 12 others killed in helicopter crash

By SHEIKH SAALIQ and ASHOK SHARMA Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — India's military chief, Gen. Bipin Rawat, and 12 others were killed Wednesday in a helicopter crash in southern Tamil Nadu state, the air force said.

It said in a tweet that the helicopter "met with a tragic accident."

The dead included Rawat's wife. The air force said one officer, Group Capt. Varun Singh, survived and is being treated in a military hospital.

The air force said the Russian-made Mi-17V5 helicopter was on its way from an air force base to the army defense services college when it crashed near the town of Coonoor, a hill station in Tamil Nadu. The reason for the crash was not immediately known.

Television images from the crash site showed plumes of smoke billowing from the debris as local residents tried to put out the fire and remove bodies from the wreckage.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi said Rawat had contributed greatly to modernizing the country's armed forces. "His insights and perspectives on strategic matters were exceptional," Modi said.

Defense Minister Rajnath Singh said Rawat "served the country with exceptional courage and diligence."

Archrival Pakistan's army chief, Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa, expressed his condolences on the "tragic death" of Rawat and his wife, its government said in a tweet.

The air force said an inquiry has been ordered into the accident.

Rawat, 63, was the most senior official in the Indian military and the first chief of defense staff, a position created by the government in 2019. He was also an adviser to the Defense Ministry.

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His primary task was to overhaul the military, which has struggled to modernize and improve coordination among the army, navy and air force.

He previously served as chief of army staff and also commanded forces in Indian-controlled Kashmir and along the frontier with China. He was a veteran of counterinsurgency operations.

In 2015, Rawat oversaw Indian "surgical strikes" into neighboring Myanmar, when para-commandos entered the country to attack Naga rebels who had ambushed and killed Indian troops.

In 2017, he awarded a gallantry medal to an army officer who had tied a civilian to the front of his jeep in Kashmir, where rebels are fighting Indian rule. The incident sparked controversy within India and outside, with rights groups saying the officer used the man as a human shield against stone-throwing protesters. Rawat said the officer's actions were within the rules because the army was facing a "dirty war" in the disputed region and had to fight using "innovative" ways.

Last month, he triggered another controversy by saying on television that Kashmir residents are offering to "lynch terrorists themselves" and that it was a "very positive sign." Lynchings are illegal under Indian law. He did not provide any evidence to support his statement.

Kashmir is divided between India and Pakistan, and both claim the entire Himalayan territory. Most Muslim Kashmiris support the rebels' goal of a united Kashmir, either independent or under Pakistan rule.

Rawat earlier survived a helicopter crash in 2015 in the northeast state of Nagaland.

The type of military transport helicopter that crashed Wednesday, Mi-17V5, is widely used in India by the army and ministers when visiting defense locations.

In 2017, an Mi-17V5 helicopter crashed in northeast Arunachal Pradesh state, killing seven military personnel.

Associated Press writer Munir Ahmed in Islamabad, Pakistan, contributed to this report.

Scholz replaces Merkel as German chancellor, opening new era

By GEIR MOULSON Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Center-left leader Olaf Scholz on Wednesday became Germany's ninth post-World War II chancellor, opening a new era for the European Union's most populous nation and largest economy after Angela Merkel's 16-year tenure.

Scholz's government takes office with high hopes of modernizing Germany and combating climate change but faces the immediate challenge of handling the country's toughest phase yet of the coronavirus pandemic.

Lawmakers voted 395-303 with six abstentions to elect Scholz — a comfortable majority, though short of the 416 seats his three-party coalition holds in the 736-seat lower house of parliament. Merkel, who is no longer a member of parliament, looked on from the spectators' gallery as parliament voted. Lawmakers gave her a standing ovation.

Scholz, 63, who had been Germany's vice chancellor and finance minister since 2018, brings a wealth of experience and discipline to an untried coalition of his center-left Social Democrats, the environmentalist Greens and the pro-business Free Democrats. The three parties are portraying the combination of former rivals as a progressive alliance that will bring new energy to the country after Merkel's near-record time in office.

"We are venturing a new departure, one that takes up the major challenges of this decade and well beyond that," Scholz said this week. If the parties succeed, he added, "that is a mandate to be reelected together at the next election."

Scholz, an unflappable and supremely self-confident figure who has displayed an ability to put aside setbacks quickly, cracked a smile as he was elected and formally appointed by President Frank-Walter Steinmeier.

The new chancellor then returned to parliament to be sworn in. Scholz, who has no religious affiliation, omitted the optional phrase "so help me God" from his oath of office, as did Merkel's predecessor,

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Gerhard Schroeder.

Merkel wished Scholz luck at a handover ceremony at the chancellery. "Take possession of this house and work with it for the good of our country," she said. Scholz thanked Merkel for her work, telling her "you made your mark on this country."

Merkel has said she won't seek another political role and didn't mention any future plans on Wednesday. The 67-year-old said earlier this year that she will take time to read and sleep "and then let's see where I show up."

Scholz's style has often been likened to Merkel's, although they are from different parties. Neither is given to public displays of emotion or rousing speeches. The former labor minister and Hamburg mayor has portrayed himself both as her natural successor and an agent of change.

Scholz quipped Wednesday that he will stick with Merkel's "northeast German mentality" and "not so much will change on that front."

The new government aims to step up efforts against climate change by expanding the use of renewable energy and bringing Germany's exit from coal-fired power forward from 2038, "ideally" to 2030. It also wants to do more to modernize the country of 83 million people, including improving its notoriously poor cellphone and internet networks.

It also plans more liberal social policies, including legalizing the sale of cannabis for recreational purposes and easing the path to German citizenship while pledging greater efforts to deport immigrants who don't win asylum.

The government also plans to increase Germany's minimum wage and to get hundreds of thousands of new apartments built to curb rising rental prices.

Scholz has signaled continuity in foreign policy, saying the government will stand up for a strong European Union and nurture the trans-Atlantic alliance. He makes his first trip abroad to Paris on Friday, maintaining a tradition for German chancellors, travel to Brussels the same day to meet EU and NATO leaders.

His three-party alliance brings both opportunities and risks for all the participants, perhaps most of all for the Greens. After 16 years in opposition, they will have to prove that they can achieve their overarching aim of cutting greenhouse gas emissions while working with partners who may have other priorities.

Green co-leader Robert Habeck is Scholz's vice chancellor, heading a revamped economy and climate ministry. The government's No. 3 official is Christian Lindner, the finance minister and leader of the Free Democrats, who insisted that the coalition reject tax hikes.

"It won't be easy to keep three different parties together," Schroeder, who led Germany from 1998 to 2005 as the country's last center-left chancellor, told Phoenix television. "But I think Olaf Scholz has the patience, but also the determination, to manage it."

The incoming government is portraying itself as a departure in both style and substance from the "grand coalitions" of Germany's traditional big parties that Merkel led for all but four years of her tenure, with the Social Democrats as junior partners.

In those tense alliances, the partners sometimes seemed preoccupied mostly with blocking each other's plans. Merkel's final term saw frequent infighting, some of it within her own center-right Union bloc, until the pandemic hit. She departs with a legacy defined largely by her acclaimed handling of a series of crises, rather than any grand visions for Germany.

The agreement to form a coalition government between three parties that had significant differences before the election was reached relatively quickly and in unexpected harmony. That will now be tested by the reality of governing; Scholz has acknowledged that dealing with the pandemic "will demand all our strength and energy."

German federal and state leaders last week announced tough new restrictions that largely target unvaccinated people. In a longer-term move, parliament will consider a general vaccine mandate. Germany has seen daily COVID-19 infections rise to record levels this fall, though they may now be stabilizing, and hospitals are feeling the strain.

"People are hoping that you ... will show leadership and take the right measures," Steinmeier told the

new Cabinet. "What matters is not listening to the loudest, but ensuring that the pandemic doesn't keep us firmly in its grip for another year and that public life can once again become a matter of course."

Follow AP's coverage of Germany's transition to a new government at <https://apnews.com/hub/germany-election> and stories on climate change issues at <https://apnews.com/hub/Climate>

With vaccine resistance high, Poland faces surge of deaths

By VANESSA GERA Associated Press

WARSAW, Poland (AP) — As 83-year-old Hanna Zientara endured subfreezing temperatures to get a COVID-19 vaccine booster shot in Warsaw, her 30-year-old grandson was starting a Canary Islands vacation while unvaccinated and stubbornly refusing his grandmother's repeated pleas to protect himself.

"I am worried about him, but I have no influence over him. None," Zientara said. "He has many doctor friends who aren't getting vaccinated, and he says if they aren't getting vaccinated, then he doesn't have to."

Poland and several other countries in Central and Eastern Europe are battling their latest surges of coronavirus cases and deaths while continuing to record much lower vaccinations rates than in Western Europe.

In Russia, more than 1,200 people with COVID-19 died every day for most of November and on several days in December, and the daily death toll remains over 1,100. Ukraine, which is recording hundreds of virus deaths a day, is emerging from its deadliest period of the pandemic.

Meanwhile, the mortality rate in Poland, while lower than it was than in the spring, recently climbed to more than 500 deaths per day and still has not peaked. On Wednesday, the country reported 592 more virus deaths, the highest number of its current wave and bringing the pandemic death toll to nearly 87,000 in the nation of 38 million.

Intensive care units are full, and doctors report that more and more children require hospitalization, including some who went through COVID-19 without symptoms but then suffered strokes.

The situation has created a dilemma for Poland's government, which has urged citizens to get vaccinated but clearly worries about alienating voters who oppose vaccine mandates or any restrictions on economic life.

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki received his vaccine booster publicly last week and urged others to get their shots to protect older adults at Christmas. He noted that some family gatherings during the pandemic have "ended tragically, ended with the departure of our grandfathers, grandmothers."

To promote vaccines, Health Minister Adam Niedzielski pointed out Monday that of the 1,085 people under 44 who died with COVID-19 so far this year in Poland, only 3% were fully vaccinated. "This black statistic could be different thanks to vaccinations," he said.

With a health system already stretched to its limits, Poland's government announced Tuesday that it is requiring doctors, other medical personnel, teachers and uniformed workers like police officers, members of the military and firefighters to be vaccinated by March 1.

Critics of the right-wing government denounced the step as too little too late, while a far-right party, Confederation, slammed it as discriminating against unvaccinated Poles.

The resistance to vaccines in Eastern Europe is rooted in distrust of pharmaceutical companies and government authorities, while disinformation also appears to be playing a role.

As worried grandmother Zientara got a Pfizer vaccine booster dose on Tuesday, the Polish government reported 504 deaths.

Sitting nearby was Andrzej Wiazecki, a 56-year-old who needed no convincing to come in for a booster shot. He said he has several friends hospitalized with COVID-19, including a previously healthy and athletic 32-year-old who is fighting for his life.

"I expect him to die, especially since there is no room for him in the intensive care unit because there are so many patients that he is lying somewhere in a corridor," he said.

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"He didn't want to get vaccinated," Wiazecki said. "His siblings are also not vaccinated, and even though he is dying, they still don't want to get vaccinated."

With 54% of Poles fully vaccinated, the country has a higher coronavirus inoculation rate than some nearby countries. Ukraine's vaccination rate is 27%, and in Russia, where domestically developed vaccines like Sputnik V are on offer, it is about 41%. Bulgaria, which like Poland belongs to the European Union, has a vaccination rate of 26%, the lowest in the bloc.

The discovery of the omicron variant last month has fueled fears in Poland, where experts believe the variant is likely already circulating though no cases have been confirmed. Many critical questions about omicron remain unanswered, including whether the virus causes more severe illness and how much it might evade immunity from past COVID-19 illness or vaccines.

According to Polish media reports, the variant's emergence led some holdouts to finally get their first vaccine shots, including in the southern mountain region of Podhale, where the vaccination rates are far below the national average.

But at the vaccination center in Warsaw, located in a blood donation center, there were not many first-timers. Coordinator Paula Rekawek said only one person had turned up in the center's first three hours Tuesday to request an initial dose.

Warsaw restaurateur Artur Jarczynski has found a business opportunity in the high level of vaccine resistance. His popular Der Elefant was the first restaurant in Poland, and until recently the only one, to require customers to show proof of vaccination to enter.

Jarczynski said while traveling in Western Europe, he was asked for proof of vaccination to dine and thought it was a good practice. When he first introduced the requirement at Der Elefant, anti-vaxxers demonstrating in front of parliament brought their protest to his restaurant and he got police protection. Jarczynski says he also was bombarded by hateful phone calls for a couple of days.

Yet many patrons appreciate the rare public space where they can feel safe while enjoying a meal, such as the mussel soup, steaks and other fare served for lunch on Tuesday. One diner, Ryszard Kowalski, said he liked knowing everyone around him was vaccinated but the restaurant's policy was proof "there is no need for government orders" to create safe environments.

But Jarczynski has not yet dared to impose the vaccine requirement in several other Warsaw restaurants he owns.

He described Der Elefant as "an island in a country of almost 40 million people, which on the one hand makes us happy, but also sad that we are just such a tiny island."

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

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Dec. 9, the 343rd day of 2021. There are 22 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 9, 2014, U.S. Senate investigators concluded the United States had brutalized scores of terror suspects with interrogation tactics that turned secret CIA prisons into chambers of suffering and did nothing to make Americans safer after the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks.

On this date:

In 1911, an explosion inside the Cross Mountain coal mine near Briceville, Tennessee, killed 84 workers. (Five were rescued.)

In 1917, British forces captured Jerusalem from the Ottoman Turks.

In 1958, the anti-communist John Birch Society was formed in Indianapolis.

In 1962, the Petrified Forest in Arizona was designated a national park.

In 1965, "A Charlie Brown Christmas," the first animated TV special featuring characters from the "Pea-

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nuts" comic strip by Charles M. Schulz, premiered on CBS.

In 1987, the first Palestinian intefadeh, or uprising, began as riots broke out in Gaza and spread to the West Bank, triggering a strong Israeli response.

In 1990, Solidarity founder Lech Walesa (lek vah-WEN'-sah) won Poland's presidential runoff by a landslide.

In 1992, Britain's Prince Charles and Princess Diana announced their separation. (The couple's divorce became final in August 1996.)

In 2000, the U-S Supreme Court ordered a temporary halt in the Florida vote count on which Al Gore pinned his best hopes of winning the White House.

In 2001, the United States disclosed the existence of a videotape in which Osama bin Laden said he was pleasantly surprised by the extent of damage from the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

In 2006, a fire broke out at a Moscow drug treatment hospital, killing 46 women trapped by barred windows and a locked gate.

In 2013, scientists revealed that NASA's Curiosity rover had uncovered signs of an ancient freshwater lake on Mars.

Ten years ago: The European Union said 26 of its 27 member countries were open to joining a new treaty tying their finances together to solve the euro crisis; Britain remained opposed. A jury in New Haven, Connecticut, condemned Joshua Komisarjevsky (koh-mih-sahr-JEV'-skee) to death for killing a woman and her two daughters during a night of terror in their suburban Cheshire home. (The other defendant in the case, Steven Hayes, had also been condemned to death; both punishments were changed to life in prison after Connecticut abolished the death penalty in 2015.) A fire at a hospital in Kolkata, India, claimed the lives of at least 93 people.

Five years ago: The White House said President Barack Obama had ordered intelligence officials to conduct a broad review of election-season cyberattacks, including the email hacks that rattled the presidential campaign and raised fresh concerns about Russia's meddling in U.S. elections. South Korean lawmakers impeached President Park Geun-hye over an explosive corruption scandal, a stunning and swift fall for the country's first female leader.

One year ago: The U.S. government and 48 states and districts sued Facebook, accusing it of abusing its market power in social networking to crush smaller competitors. (A federal judge dismissed the lawsuits in June 2021; federal regulators filed a revised complaint in August.) Commercial flights with Boeing 737 Max jetliners resumed for the first time since they were grounded worldwide nearly two years earlier following two deadly accidents; Brazil's Gol Airlines became the first in the world to return the planes to its active fleet. NASA named the 18 astronauts — half of them women — who would train for its Artemis moon-landing program.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Dame Judi Dench is 87. Actor Beau Bridges is 80. Football Hall of Famer Dick Butkus is 79. Actor Michael Nouri is 76. Former Sen. Thomas Daschle, D-S.D., is 74. World Golf Hall of Famer Tom Kite is 72. Singer Joan Armatrading is 71. Actor Michael Dorn is 69. Actor John Malkovich is 68. Country singer Sylvia is 65. Singer Donny Osmond is 64. Rock musician Nick Seymour (Crowded House) is 63. Comedian Mario Cantone is 62. Actor David Anthony Higgins is 60. Actor Joe Lando is 60. Actor Felicity Huffman is 59. Empress Masako of Japan is 58. Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y., is 55. Rock singer-musician Thomas Flowers (Oleander) is 54. Rock musician Brian Bell (Weezer) is 53. Rock singer-musician Jakob Dylan (Wallflowers) is 52. TV personality-businessperson Lori Greiner (TV: "Shark Tank") is 52. Actor Allison Smith is 52. Songwriter and former "American Idol" judge Kara DioGuardi (dee-oh-GWAHR'-dee) is 51. Country singer David Kersh is 51. Actor Reiko (RAY'-koh) Aylesworth is 49. Rock musician Tre Cool (Green Day) is 49. Rapper Canibus is 47. Actor Kevin Daniels is 45. Actor-writer-director Mark Duplass is 45. Rock singer Imogen Heap is 44. Actor Jesse Metcalfe is 43. Actor Simon Helberg is 41. Actor Jolene Purdy is 38. Actor Joshua Sasse is 34. Actor Ashleigh Brewer is 31. Olympic gold and silver medal gymnast McKayla Maroney is 26. Olympic silver medal gymnast MyKayla Skinner is 25.