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UpComing Events

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.



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.**



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FRI. *December 17*

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MS/HS Christmas Concert



The sixth grade choir, under the direction of Kayla Duncan, sang, "The Holiday Season," and "Swingin' with Santa C!" (Photo lifted from GDILIVE.COM video)



The Junior High Choir, under the direction of Kayla Duncan, sang, "God Rest You, Merry Gentleman with Nutcracker Suite" (accompanied by Desiree Yeigh and Elliana Weismantel), "Something Told the Wild Geese (with soloists Cambria Bonn and Natalia Warrington, and Jackson Hopfinger and Brody Lord), and "Jingle Bell Dash!" (Photo lifted from GDILIVE.COM video)

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The Sixth Grade Band, under the direction of Desiree Yeigh, performed, "Jingle Bones" (featuring the Trombone Section), "Carol of the Kings," and "All I Want for Christmas Is My Two Front Teeth." (Photo lifted from GDILIVE.COM video)



The Junior High Band, under the direction of Desiree Yeigh, performed, "A Cartoon Christmas" with soloists Garrett Schultz on Baritone and Jayden Schwan on Trumpet), and "Santa the Barbarian," with Carter Barse as speaker and percussion feature Lincoln Krause, Teagan Hanten, Trinity Smith, Elliana Weismantel, Ashtyn Bahr and Cadance Tullis. (Photo lifted from GDILIVE.COM video)

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Percussion specialists for "Sing We All Noel" during the High School Choir performance were Elliana Weismantel, Cadance Tullis, Ashtyn Bahr, Trinity Smith and Kianna Sander. (Photo lifted from GDILIVE.COM video)



The High School Choir, under the direction of Kayla Duncan, sang, "Sing We All Noel," "Coventry Carol" and "Children, Go Where I Send Thee" (with soloists Julianna Kosel, Abby Jensen and Carter Barse, Rebecca Poor and Camryn Kurtz, Sarah Jacobs and Savannah Bible and Anna Bisbee and Kianna Sander). (Photo lifted from GDILIVE.COM video)

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The Chamber Choir sang, "Hurry Now to Bethlehem." (Photo lifted from GDILIVE.COM video)



The Flex Band, under the direction of Austin Fordham, performed, "Brazilian Sleigh Bells."
(Photo lifted from GDILIVE.COM video)

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The High School Band, under the direction of Austin Fordham, performed, "Celtic Carol" (Gretchen Dinger on flute), "Carol of the Night," and "The Polar Express" with soloists Cassandra Schultz on trumpet, Jackson Dinger on French Horn and Cole Bisbee on Trombone.

(Photo lifted from GDILIVE.COM video)

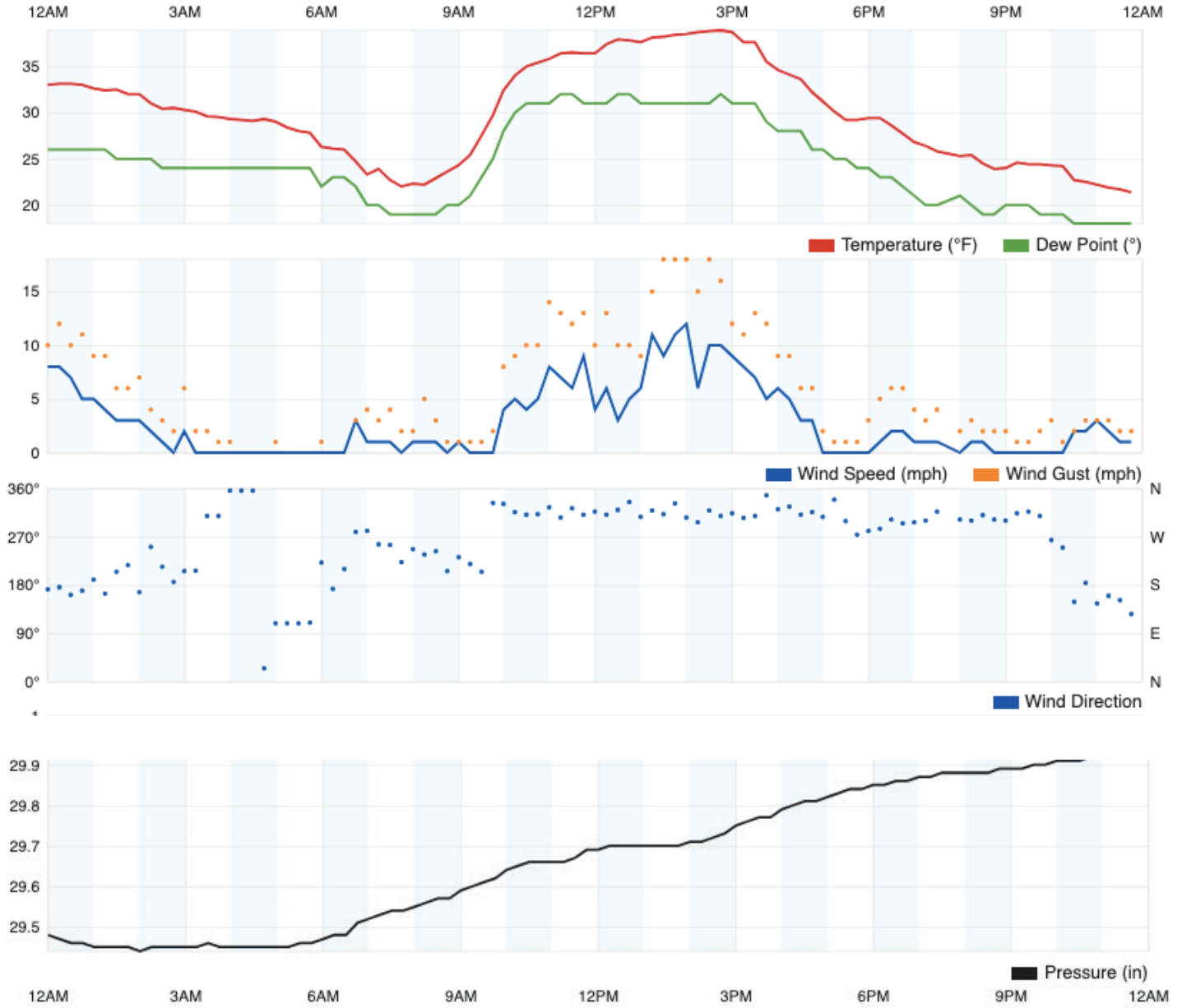


The 6th through 12th grade musicians and audience finished the concert with a Holiday Sing A-long. (Photo lifted from GDILIVE.COM video)

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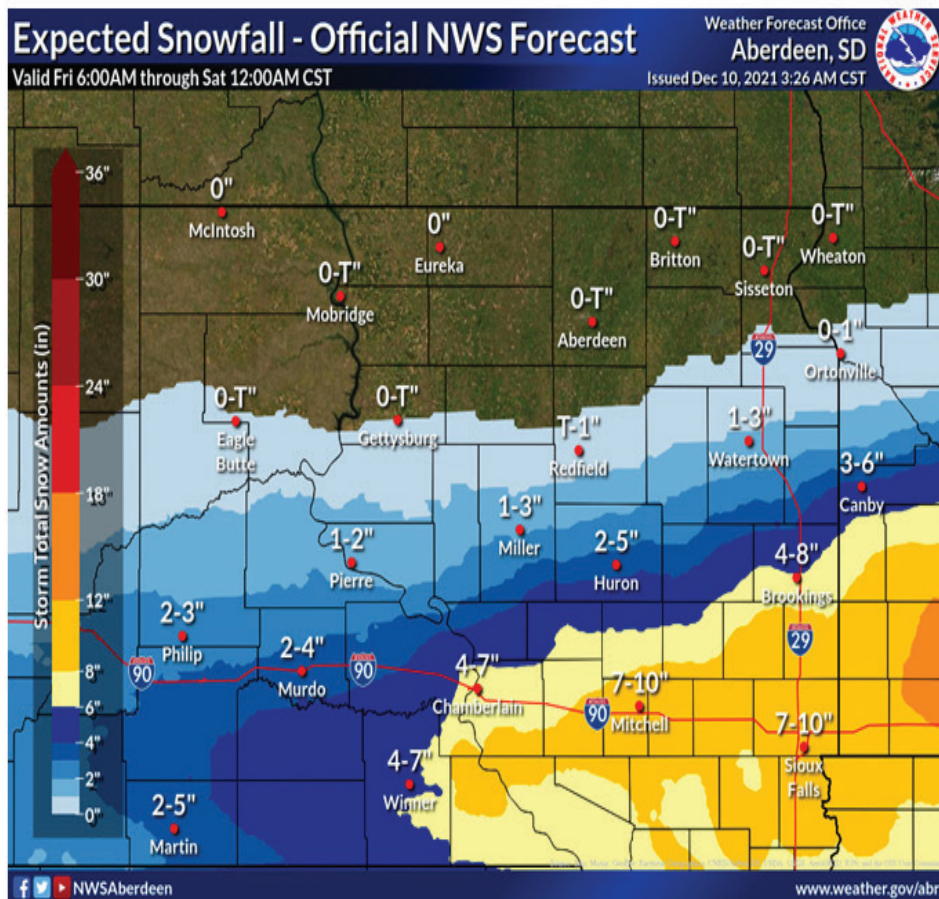
Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Saturday	Saturday Night	Sunday
				
Cloudy then Slight Chance Snow	Gradual Clearing	Sunny	Partly Cloudy	Mostly Sunny
High: 32 °F	Low: 13 °F	High: 35 °F	Low: 21 °F	High: 39 °F



- Snowfall Totals Starting 6am Thru This Evening
- Heavy Snow Band Just South of I90 This AM
- Transition Through The Day to Broad Snowfall East River (With Snow Bands Between Brookings – Mitchell – Sioux Falls)
- I90 & I29 Travel Expected To Be Significantly Impacted

We continue to monitor a heavy snow band across south west and south central South Dakota. This will wane by mid day as the focus shifts to eastern South Dakota with the potential for additional heavy snow. If traveling across these parts of the state, anticipate that some areas will experience significant travel delays.

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Today in Weather History

December 10, 2000: Heavy snow of 6 to 8 inches fell across parts of Lyman and Jones Counties on the 10th and 11th. Some amounts included 6 inches at Kennebec and Okaton and 8 inches at Murdo.

December 10, 1699: A severe ice storm hit Boston, Massachusetts causing much damage to orchards.

December 10, 2002: A shower of tiny fish rained down on Korona, a village in the mountains of northern Greece. A Greek television reported a waterspout caused the incident on Lake Doirani.

1699 - A severe ice storm hit Boston, MA, causing much damage to orchards. (The Weather Channel)

1946 - The temperature at New York City soared to 70 degrees. (David Ludlum)

1949 - The barometric pressure at Las Vegas, NV, reached a record low reading of 29.17 inches (987.8 millibars). (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A cold front brought high winds to the eastern slopes of the Northern and Central Rockies. Winds gusted to 97 mph at Mines Peak CO. In Wyoming, up to a foot of snow blanketed the Teton Village Ski Resort, northwest of Jackson. Strong chinook winds in the Central High Plains Region, gusting to 61 mph at Scottsbluff NE, warmed temperatures to near 70 degrees. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Squalls produced heavy snow in the Lower Great Lakes Region. Totals in northeastern Ohio ranged up to 14 inches at Harpersfield, and totals in western New York State ranged up to 14 inches at Sodus. In the snowbelt of Upper Michigan, the Ontonogon area reported two feet of snow in two days. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Heavy snow fell across the northern and central mountains of Colorado, with 24 inches reported at Steamboat Springs. Six to twelve inches of snow fell in the Denver and Boulder area delaying plane flights and snarling traffic. Heavy snow also spread across the Central Plains into the Mississippi Valley. Winner SD received 11 inches of snow, and more than ten inches of snow was reported north of Sioux City IA. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1992 - A slow-moving Nor'easter storm batters the northeast U.S. coast killing 19 people.

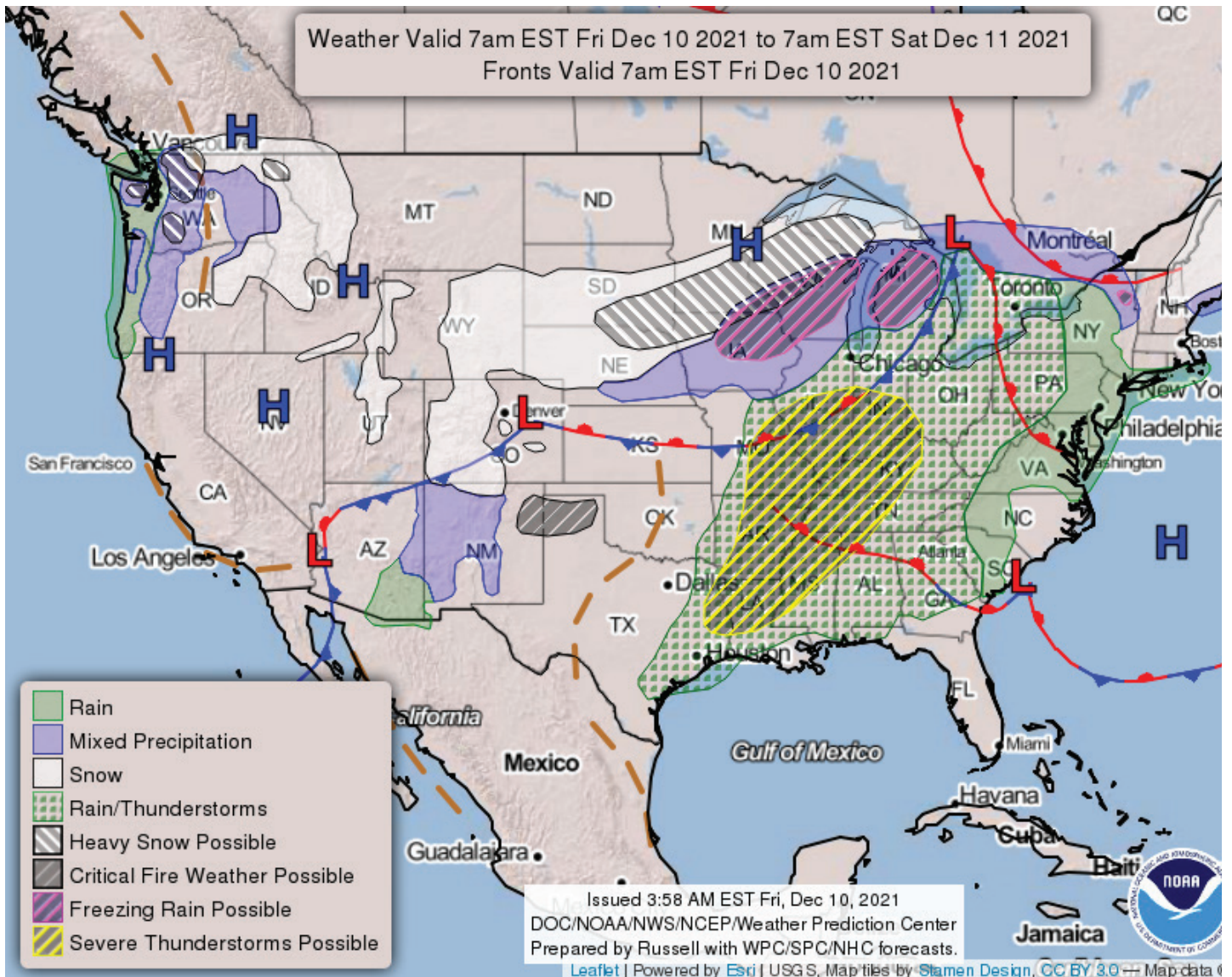
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 38.9 °F at 2:45 PM
Low Temp: 21.4 °F at 11:45 PM
Wind: 18 mph at 1:45 PM
Precip: 0.00

Record High: 58° in 1979
Record Low: -29° in 1972
Average High: 31°F
Average Low: 10°F
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.20
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.11
Average Precip to date: 21.41
Precip Year to Date: 19.97
Sunset Tonight: 4:50:53 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:00:47 AM



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WHOSE PARTY?

Competent! Outstanding! Careful! Friendly! Supportive! Bright! Cheerful! Caring! Gracious! And the list of words to describe Beth, the secretary to the president of the company, could go on and on. She was loved by everyone who knew her.

When it came time for her birthday one year, her co-workers decided to honor her with a lavish party. They rented a beautiful ballroom, hired the best caterer, designed a special cake, had special napkins with her name printed on them, and collected money to buy a gift.

All went well. The tables were beautifully set, the caterer was on time, the guests arrived, and there was excitement in the room. Everyone kept looking at the entrance awaiting the arrival of Beth. After waiting for fifteen minutes, the co-worker who organized the event said to Beth's best friend, "Where is she?"

"I'm not sure," she replied. "I'll phone her."

She did – and discovered that she was at her favorite sandwich shop enjoying her lunch - alone. No one thought to invite Beth to her own celebration!

There will be many parties this Christmas. And as usual, the Guest, Whose birthday we celebrate, will not be invited. Tables will be set, lights will blink, guests will arrive, laughter will ring out, gifts will be exchanged, everyone will have fun – but Jesus will not be present. No one will think to invite Him – the One who should be the main attraction.

Prayer: Lord of the season, may we place Your Son, our Savior, at the center of everything we do this Christmas. May we never forget, "It's all about Him." In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Matthew 2:11 And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

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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

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News from the  Associated Press

Thursday's Scores

The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=

Bridgewater-Emery 61, Colome 38
Elk Point-Jefferson 78, Canton 71
Faulkton 65, Wessington Springs 41
Gillette Early Bird Tournament=
St. Thomas More 72, Campbell County, Wyo. 54

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

Aberdeen Christian 53, Potter County 38
Brandon Valley 70, Sioux Falls O'Gorman 66
Corsica/Stickney 67, Chamberlain 47
Crazy Horse 86, St. Francis Indian 11
Elk Point-Jefferson 40, Canton 36, OT
Faulkton 57, Wessington Springs 38
Flandreau 85, Chester 31
Lakota Tech 78, Lower Brule 24
Leola/Frederick 49, Northwestern 22
Madison 50, Dell Rapids 40
Oakes, N.D. 69, Langford 26
Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 50, Lake Preston 28
Philip 58, Bennett County 51
Rapid City Christian 63, Wall 60
Sioux Falls Washington 70, Sioux Falls Lincoln 45
Waubay/Summit 70, Clark/Willow Lake 54
White River 64, Belle Fourche 50
Gillette Early Bird Tournament=
St. Thomas More 60, Campbell County, Wyo. 58

Some high school basketball scores provided by Scorestream.com, <https://scorestream.com/>

FCS quarterfinals feature 6 former national champions

By HANK KURZ Jr. AP Sports Writer

Many of the perennial contenders are still in the title chase as the Football Championship Subdivision playoffs head into the quarterfinal round, but the playoffs have once again shown nothing is a given no matter what the name is on the front of the jersey.

Defending national champion Sam Houston, with all of its starters back, emerged from a first-round bye and needed a touchdown with 2:07 left and a fourth-down, goal-line stop on the penultimate play of regulation to pull out a 49-42 victory.

And the champs were facing a team that had never played in December.

"We've won five playoff games this year by a play, and that's just the nature of the playoffs," coach K.C. Keeler said, referring to his team's run during the 2020 FCS postseason, which was played in the spring of this year due to the pandemic. "It speaks a lot to the resilience of our team, the character of our team, the fact that we don't panic and our resolve."

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The top-seeded Bearkats (11-0) have won 22 in a row overall, including all 17 home playoff games in their history. Keeler, who also led Delaware to the national title in 2003, is 31-0 in his career in home playoff games.

"In the playoffs, it's win and survive. Win and advance," Keeler said.

But rich history abounds among teams still playing. Six of the remaining playoff squads have won national titles, all but one of them within the last two decades. In addition to Sam Houston, the list includes James Madison, North Dakota State, Montana, Montana State and Villanova.

Montana State (10-2), which won it all in 1984, will next try to knock off Sam Houston.

Second-seeded North Dakota State had won eight of the last nine national championships heading into the 2020 postseason, losing in the final to James Madison in 2016. The Bison advanced Saturday with a 38-7 win over Southern Illinois and will face ETSU (11-1), which beat Kennesaw State 32-21. The Buccaneers have never won the championship.

The weekend kicks off with sixth-seeded Montana at No. 3 JMU on Friday night.

Both teams are rolling, coming off impressive offensive performances. The Dukes (11-1) got six scoring passes from Cole Johnson — and three one-play touchdown drives in the second quarter alone — en route to a 59-20 victory against Southeastern Louisiana.

Montana (10-2), making its record 25th playoff appearance, overcame 530 passing yards and five touchdown passes by Eastern Washington's Eric Barriere to beat the Eagles 57-41, JMU coach Curt Cignetti thought Montana's performance was something of an aberration.

"They're No. 2 in the country in scoring defense. I think they're first in the country in defensive touchdowns," Cignetti said. The Grizzlies dropped to eighth after the Eastern Washington game, but still allow just 15.3 points per game.

"This is a really good football team. I mean, they beat the Washington Huskies in the opener at Washington," Cignetti said, recalling a 13-7 victory against the then-20th ranked Huskies. "They've been a good program for a long time."

South Dakota State is the other team heading to the quarterfinal round never to win the championship. But while the Jackrabbits have been here before, they lost to Sam Houston in the 2020 FCS national championship game.

But South Dakota State (10-3) showed it belongs by knocking off fourth-seeded Sacramento State 24-19 on the road.

The Jackrabbits will now face fifth-seeded Villanova (10-2). The Wildcats are expected to be a tough out. Earlier this season Villanova rallied from an 11-point deficit to hand James Madison its only loss, 28-27 on Oct. 9.

The quarterfinal matchups should be entertaining if they are anything like what the playoffs have been thus far.

More AP college football: <https://apnews.com/hub/college-football> and https://twitter.com/AP_Top25 Sign up for the AP's college football newsletter: <https://apnews.com/cfbtop25>

Police recover 17 stolen firearms at Sioux Falls residence

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Seventeen stolen guns have been recovered at a residence in Sioux Falls after a theft victim used GPS tracking which led to the house, according to police.

Authorities said an investigation began after some items were stolen from a car in in south Sioux Falls last October. Among the items was Apple AirPods. The owner of the headphones tracking them down using GPS.

Detectives eventually got a search warrant for the house and recovered the stolen items along with 17 firearms. Police say 12 guns were stolen from vehicles outside the city limits, including Minnehaha, McCook, Lincoln and Moody counties.

Authorities are searching for a 23-year-old man wanted for possessing the stolen guns.

More than 900 instruments donated to reservation schools

PINE RIDGE, S.D. (AP) — High schools across the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation have received more than 900 donated musical instruments as part of a program created by the rock band Widespread Panic.

A nonprofit organization, Conscious Alliance, brought the most recent delivery to Pine Ridge High School Wednesday where students in the music program helped unload the instruments.

The school's music teacher, Ann Chesley, has been keeping the school's music department alive any way she could.

"A lot of the instruments that we have I have put together, I've bought at garage sales and pawn shops — beg, borrow and steal anywhere we can get them," Chesley said. "And these are new. These are specifically what we want, what we asked for. Nothing's used. It's all new, it's the top of the line, it's the very best."

Kristen Two Lance is a junior at the school and started playing the trumpet when she was in ninth grade, South Dakota Public Broadcasting reported.

"It feels nice because they told us about this a couple of times, but we never really got to see them or have it happen," Two Lance said. "What I think is that there is going to be more people that are going to probably join, because of the more instruments and more percussion items that showed up."

The collaboration between Widespread Panic's "Tunes for Tots" program and Conscious Alliance began two years ago when they met with music teachers and Lakota culture teachers to expand students' access to instruments.

Red Cloud High School, Crazy Horse High School and Little Wound High School are also receiving instruments through the program.

Al Unser, a four-time winner of Indianapolis 500, dies at 82

By JENNA FRYER AP Auto Racing Writer

Al Unser, one of only four drivers to win the Indianapolis 500 a record four times, died Thursday following a long illness. He was 82.

Unser died at his home in Chama, New Mexico, with his wife, Susan, by his side, Indianapolis Motor Speedway said early Friday. He had been battling cancer for 17 years.

"My heart is so saddened. My father passed away last night," son Al Unser Jr., himself a two-time Indy 500 winner, posted on social media. "He was a Great man and even a Greater Father. Rest In Peace Dad!"

Unser is the third member of one of America's most famed racing families to die in 2021. His oldest brother, three-time Indy 500 winner Bobby Unser, died in May, and Bobby Unser Jr. passed six weeks after his father.

Known as "Big Al" once his own son made a name for himself in racing, Unser is part of an elite club of four-time winners of "The Greatest Spectacle in Racing." Unser won the Indy 500 in 1970, 1971, 1978 and 1987, and is the only driver in history to have both a sibling and a child also win one of the biggest races in the world.

His final victory at age 47 made him the oldest winner in Indy 500 history. He dominated in his first Indy win in 1970 by starting from the pole and leading all but 10 of the 200 laps. Unser beat runner-up Mark Donohue by 32 seconds that year.

"Al was the class of the field," fellow competitor Johnny Rutherford said.

Unser led over half the laps in three of his Indy 500 victories, and his 644 total laps at Indianapolis is most in race history. He led the final lap of the 1987 race to tie Ralph DePalma's 75-year-old record of 612 laps led, and Unser went on to lead 31 more laps over his final five starts to smash the mark.

He made 27 starts in the Indy 500, third most in history, and qualified once on the pole and five times on the front row.

Unser won three Indy car national championships over his career and 39 victories— sixth on the all-time list.

He and son Al Jr. were the first father-son pairing at Indianapolis, and in 1985 they battled one another

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for the CART championship. A pass in the closing laps of the race gave Unser a fourth-place finish in the season finale at Miami's Tamiami Park road course, and it was enough for him to beat Al Jr. for the championship by a single point. He fought back tears while describing the "empty feeling" of defeating his son.

Unser also ran five NASCAR races in his career, finishing fourth in the 1968 Daytona 500. He earned three top-10 finishes in NASCAR. He also won three times in the International Race of Champions, an all-star series that pitted the top drivers from various disciplines against each other.

Unser won the Indy car "Triple Crown" by winning all three of the 500-mile races on the 1978 schedule, which included stops at Pocono Raceway and in Ontario, California. He's the only driver in history to win all three of those races in the same season.

The Unser family combined for a record nine wins in the Indy 500; Al Jr. won the Indy 500 twice — in 1992 and 1994. Coincidentally, Al Unser, Al Unser Jr. and Bobby Unser all won their final Indy 500s driving for Roger Penske. Castroneves won his first three Indy 500's driving for Penske.

Unser earlier this year was at Indianapolis Motor Speedway to welcome Helio Castroneves as the newest member of the four-time winners club. Unser achieved the feat after A.J. Foyt, and Rick Mears won his fourth in 1991. Castroneves won in May to become the first new member in 30 years.

"Some days the race track smiles on you and some days, you got it the other way," Unser said during the July celebration. "It's not always that you're going to think you're going to win because your chances are very slim. There's 32 other guys who want it as bad as you do."

Unser received his Baby Borg — the 18-inch replica of the Indy 500 winner's Borg-Warner Trophy that lives onsite in the speedway's museum — during a celebration in May with family and friends. He was set to be honored in 2020 on the 50th anniversary of his 1970 victory at Indianapolis, but the celebration was postponed because of the pandemic.

Both Castroneves and two-time Indy 500 winner Takuma Sato lauded Unser, with Sato calling Unser's speech at the May winner's ceremony "very funny and so charming."

"I will always remember Big Al welcoming me to the speedway," Castroneves told The Associated Press on Friday. "He and Johnny Rutherford were the two helping me with my rookie orientation. He will be missed."

The youngest of four racing brothers, Unser was born in Albuquerque in 1939 to a family of hardcore racers. His father Jerry Unser and two uncles, Louis and Joe, were also drivers. Beginning in 1926 the family began competing in the Pikes Peak International Hill Climb, an annual road race held in Colorado.

Al's oldest brother, Jerry, became the first Unser to qualify for the Indianapolis 500 in 1958; he was killed in a crash during practice the following year.

Unser began racing himself in 1957 when he was 18, but competed mostly in sprint cars. He made it to Indy in 1965 driving in a car owned by Foyt and was part of the rookie class with future Indy 500 winners Mario Andretti (1969) and Gordon Johncock (1973, 1982).

"Al was one of the smartest drivers I ever raced against," Andretti said. "I often said that I wished I could have had some of his patience."

The Unser family combined for 73 career starts in the Indy 500 — a number bettered only by the 76 starts by the Andretti family. The Unser participation spans Al (27 races), Bobby (19), and Al Jr. (19), as well as Johnny (five), Robby (two) and Jerry (one).

Unser was inducted into the Indianapolis Motor Speedway Hall of Fame in 1986 and the International Motorsports Hall of Fame in 1998. His collection of trophies and cars is housed at the Unser Racing Museum in Albuquerque.

Unser is survived by wife, Susan, and son, Al Jr. He was preceded in death by daughters Mary and Deborah.

More AP auto racing: <https://apnews.com/hub/auto-racing> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

The AP Interview: 'We want justice' on climate, Nakate says

By CARA ANNA Associated Press

KAMPALA, Uganda (AP) — The capital of Uganda coughs itself awake on weekdays under a soft blanket

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of smog. Kampala's hills come into sharper focus as the morning rush of minibuses and motorbikes fades. It is this East African city that one of the world's most well-known climate activists, Vanessa Nakate, calls home.

The 25-year-old's rise in profile has been quick. Not even three years have passed since she set out with relatives in Kampala to stage her first, modest protest over how the world is treating its only planet.

In an interview this week with The Associated Press — which last year drew international attention and Nakate's dismay by cropping her from a photo — she reflected on the whirlwind. She spoke of her disappointment in the outcome of the U.N. climate talks in Scotland and what she and other young activists plan for the year to come.

"We expected the leaders to rise up for the people, to rise up for the planet" at the talks known as COP26, she said. Instead, the world could be on a pathway to warm 2.4 degrees Celsius (4.3 degrees Fahrenheit) over pre-industrial times.

That's well above the goal of limiting warming to 1.5C — and would be "a death sentence for so many communities on the front lines of the climate crisis," Nakate said.

Globally, the signs are dire. The Arctic is warming three times faster than the rest of the planet. The dramatic drop in carbon dioxide emissions from COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns has almost disappeared. This year, forests burned in Siberia's weakening permafrost, while record-shattering heatwaves in Canada and the U.S. Pacific Northwest and deadly flooding in Europe brought the climate threat home to some who once thought they could outspend it.

But many of the most-affected communities are in Africa, whose 1.3 billion people contribute the least to global emissions, less than 4%, but stand to suffer from it most.

That suffering, in some cases, has already begun: Deadly drought fells wildlife and livestock in parts of East Africa, water scarcity hits areas in West and Southern Africa, and hunger affects many millions of people, from Madagascar to Somalia, as a result.

And yet the \$100 billion in financing per year promised by richer nations to help developing countries deal with the coming catastrophe has not appeared.

"We cannot adapt to starvation," Nakate said, her voice soft but firm as the introvert in her gives way to the convictions that have brought her this far. "We cannot adapt to extinction, we cannot adapt to lost cultures, lost traditions, to lost histories, and the climate crisis is taking all of these things away."

The next big climate conference will be in Africa, in Egypt, a chance for the spotlight to fall squarely on the continent.

It will be a test for activists and negotiators from Africa's 54 countries who have long jostled for space at global climate events.

"Many times, activists in Africa have been called missing voices. But we are not missing," Nakate said. "We are present, we are available, we are just unheard."

She watched as some activists from African countries faced the challenges of securing funding, accreditation or access to COVID-19 vaccinations as they sought to attend COP26. She has spoken of feeling erased herself when she was cropped out of an AP photo of climate activists last year at the World Economic Forum. The AP apologized for its error in judgment and the pain it caused her.

But it is not enough to simply listen to Africa's climate activists, Nakate said this week. People with power must act on those demands.

"We don't want to just hear sweet phrases from them, sweet commitments," she said. "Commitments will not change the planet, pledges will not stop the suffering of people."

Specifically, Nakate said, drastic action is needed by the leaders in government and business that continue to fund the extraction of fossil fuels, like coal and oil.

She chose not to call out anyone by name, but when asked whether Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, in power since 1986, had replied to a letter she wrote about a controversial oil pipeline project to ship crude from Uganda to neighboring Tanzania, she said no.

In fact, the 77-year-old leader has never been in contact with Nakate, who became one of the world's

most well-known Ugandans not long after graduating from university with a business degree and becoming inspired by climate activism.

In her recent book "A Bigger Picture," Nakate reflects on how leaders' decisions on climate have real-life consequences far beyond the data that often dominate the conversation.

She worries about how farmers who lose their crops to climate shocks will feed their families, and how lost income can force children out of school and young women into early marriage.

"This isn't just about us wanting a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions," Nakate said. "We want justice that centers the protection of the planet and the protection of the people because the climate crisis exacerbates poverty first of all. We cannot eradicate poverty if climate change is pushing millions of people into extreme poverty and keeping them in poverty traps."

Asked how young climate activists can make sure that they are central to decision-making worldwide, Nakate expressed confidence that they are making themselves heard, creating their own platforms on social media and elsewhere.

"If the table is not given to you, you make one for yourself," she said — a message she could well tweet to her 230,000-plus followers.

In 2022, Nakate's work will be closer to home as she pursues a project to provide schools in Uganda with solar panels and eco-friendly cookstoves to reduce the amount of firewood consumed.

"I can't believe how fast this journey has been," she said as she realized that within weeks it will be the third anniversary of her first climate protest in Kampala. "Activism can be very hard, a lot of work, but it takes love and grace to continue to speak."

It also takes a certain hope, she said, and as a born-again Christian she finds that hope in God. It helps her believe that "the future you're fighting for is actually possible and you can achieve it."

53 dead after truck smuggling migrants crashes in Mexico

By MANUEL DE LA CRUZ and EDGAR H. CLEMENTE Associated Press

TUXTLA GUTIERREZ, Mexico (AP) — Rescue workers rushing to a highway accident found a horrific scene of death and injury after a freight truck jammed with as many as 200 migrants tipped over and crashed into the base of a steel pedestrian bridge in southern Mexico.

The migrants inside the cargo trailer were tossed and crushed in a pile of both the living and the dead.

By late Thursday, the death toll stood at 53, and authorities said at least 54 people had been injured. It was one of the worst single-day death tolls for migrants in Mexico since the 2010 massacre of 72 migrants by the Zetas drug cartel in the northern state of Tamaulipas.

Volunteer rescuers hauled bodies off the pile by their arms and legs, while some migrants scrambled to extract themselves from the twisted steel sheets of the collapsed container.

One young man, pinned in a heap of unmoving bodies, wriggled to free the lower half of his frame, his face wrenched into a grimace as he extracted himself from the weight of the dead.

Nearby, a man blinked his eyes, unable to move as he lay on the shoulder of the road. Next to him was a fellow migrant, stouter and older, whose eyes stared lifeless and unblinking into the setting sun.

While the Mexican government is trying to appease the United States by stopping caravans of walking migrants and allowing the reinstatement of the "Remain in Mexico" policy, it hasn't been able to stop the flood of migrants stuffed hundreds at a time into freight trucks operated by smugglers who charge thousands of dollars to take them to the U.S. border — trips that all too often lead them only to their deaths.

The most severely injured, many bloodied, were carried by their arms and legs to plastic sheets set on the road. Those who could walk were led, stunned and uncomprehending, to the same sheets. Ambulances, cars and pickup trucks were pressed into service, ferrying the injured to hospitals.

Later, the dead were laid in rows of white sheets, side by side, on the highway.

Rescue workers who first arrived said that even more migrants had been aboard the truck when it crashed and had fled for fear of being detained by immigration agents. One paramedic said some of those who hurried into surrounding neighborhoods were bloodied or bruised, but still limped away in their desper-

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tion to escape.

About 200 migrants may have been packed into the truck, said Guatemala's top human rights official, Jordán Rodas. While shocking, that number is not unusual for migrant smuggling operations in Mexico, and the weight of the load — combined with speed and a nearby curve — may have been enough to throw the truck off balance, authorities said.

Luis Manuel Moreno, head of the Chiapas state civil defense office, said about 21 of the injured had serious wounds and were taken to local hospitals. The federal Attorney General's Office said three were critically injured in the crash on a highway leading from the Guatemalan border toward the Chiapas state capital.

Sitting on the pavement beside the overturned trailer, survivor Celso Pacheco of Guatemala said the truck felt like it was speeding and then seemed to lose control.

Pacheco said there were migrants mostly from Guatemala and Honduras aboard and estimated there were eight to 10 young children. He said he was trying to reach the United States, but now expected to be deported to Guatemala.

Marco Antonio Sánchez, director of the Chiapas Firefighter Institute, said ambulances raced victims to three hospitals, carrying three to four injured each. When there weren't enough ambulances, they loaded them into pickup trucks, he said.

Guatemalan President Alejandro Giammattei wrote on Twitter: "I deeply regret the tragedy in Chiapas state, and I express my solidarity for the victims' families, to whom we will offer all the necessary consular assistance, including repatriation."

At the Vatican, Pope Francis, who visited Chiapas in 2015 and has made the plight of migrants a hallmark of his papacy, sent a telegram of condolences Friday to the archbishop of Tuxtla Gutierrez. In the note, he offered prayers for the victims, their families and for the injured.

The truck had originally been a closed freight module of the kind used to transport perishable goods. The container was smashed open by the force of the impact. It was unclear if the driver survived.

Those who spoke to survivors said the migrants told of boarding the truck in Mexico, near the border with Guatemala, and of paying between \$2,500 and \$3,500 to be taken to Mexico's central state of Puebla. Once there, they would presumably have contracted with another set of smugglers to take them to the U.S. border.

In recent months, Mexican authorities have tried to block migrants from walking in large groups toward the U.S. border, but the clandestine and illicit flow of smuggling has continued.

In October, in one of the largest busts in recent memory, authorities in the northern border state of Tamaulipas found 652 mainly Central American migrants jammed into a convoy of six cargo trucks heading toward the U.S. border.

Irineo Mujica, an activist who is leading a march of about 400 migrants who have been walking for almost 1 1/2 months across southern Mexico, blamed Thursday's disaster on Mexico cracking down on migrant caravans.

Mujica and his group had almost reached the outskirts of Mexico City, after weeks of dealing with National Guard officers who tried to block the march. Mujica said the group would stop and offer prayers for the dead migrants.

"These policies that kill us, that murder us, is what leads to this type of tragedy," Mujica said.

In fact, they are two very different groups. Caravans generally attract migrants who don't have the thousands of dollars needed to pay migrant smugglers.

Migrants involved in serious accidents are often allowed to stay in Mexico at least temporarily because they are considered witnesses to and victims of a crime, and Mexico's National Immigration Institute said it would offer humanitarian visas to the survivors.

The agency also said the Mexican government would help identify the dead and cover funeral costs or repatriation of their remains.

Mass deaths of migrants are something that President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has been desperate to avoid, even as his administration has accepted requests from the U.S. government to stem the flow

of migrants moving north.

"It is very painful," he wrote on his Twitter account about the crash.

UK court allows Assange's extradition to US for spying case

By DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — A British appellate court opened the door Friday for Julian Assange to be extradited to the United States by overturning a lower court's decision that the WikiLeaks founder's mental health was too fragile to withstand the American criminal justice system.

The High Court in London ruled that U.S. assurances were enough to guarantee Assange would be treated humanely and directed a lower court judge to send the extradition request to Britain's interior minister for review. Home Secretary Priti Patel, who oversees law enforcement in the U.K., will make the final decision on whether to extradite Assange.

"There is no reason why this court should not accept the assurances as meaning what they say," the High Court ruling stated. "There is no basis for assuming that the USA has not given the assurances in good faith."

Assange's fiancé, Stella Moris, called the decision a "grave miscarriage of justice" and said Assange's lawyers would seek to appeal to the U.K. Supreme Court.

"We will fight," Moris said outside court, where supporters gathered with banners demanding Assange's release.

"Every generation has an epic fight to fight and this is ours, because Julian represents the fundamentals of what it means to live in a free society," she said.

Assange, 50, is currently being held at London's high-security Belmarsh Prison. The High Court ordered that he remain in custody pending the outcome of the extradition case.

In January, a lower court judge refused the U.S. request to extradite Assange to face spying charges over WikiLeaks' publication of secret military documents a decade ago. District Judge Vanessa Baraitser denied extradition on health grounds, saying the Australian citizen was likely to kill himself if held under harsh U.S. prison conditions.

The United States appealed, challenging the notion that Assange's mental health made him too vulnerable to withstand the U.S. judicial system. James Lewis, a lawyer for the U.S. government, said Assange "has no history of serious and enduring mental illness" and does not meet the threshold of being so ill that he cannot resist harming himself.

U.S. authorities have told British judges that if Assange is extradited for prosecution, he would be eligible to serve any U.S. prison sentence he receives in his native Australia. The authorities also said he wouldn't be held at the supermax penitentiary in Florence, Colorado, the highest-security prison in the United States.

The U.S. has indicted Assange on 17 espionage charges and one charge of computer misuse over WikiLeaks' publication of thousands of leaked military and diplomatic documents. The charges carry a maximum sentence of 175 years in prison, although Lewis said "the longest sentence ever imposed for this offense is 63 months."

Since WikiLeaks began publishing classified documents more than a decade ago, Assange has become a flashpoint figure.

Some see him as a dangerous secret-spiller who endangered the lives of informers and others who helped the U.S. in war zones. Others say WikiLeaks shone a light on official malfeasance that governments want to keep secret.

American prosecutors say Assange unlawfully helped U.S. Army intelligence analyst Chelsea Manning steal classified diplomatic cables and military files that WikiLeaks later published, putting lives at risk. Lawyers for Assange argue that he was acting as a journalist and is entitled to First Amendment freedom of speech protections for publishing documents that exposed U.S. military wrongdoing in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Assange has been in prison since he was arrested in April 2019 for skipping bail during a separate legal battle. Before that, he spent seven years holed up inside Ecuador's Embassy in London. Assange sought

protection in the embassy in 2012 to avoid extradition to Sweden to face allegations of rape and sexual assault.

Sweden dropped the sex crimes investigations in November 2019 because so much time had elapsed.

South Korea reports its worst virus surge since pandemic

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — New coronavirus infections in South Korea exceeded 7,000 for the third consecutive day on Friday, as the worst surge since the start of the pandemic overwhelmed hospitals and depleted health care workforce.

Critics have blamed the spread on complacency by the government, which dramatically lowered social distancing rules at the start of November in what officials described as the first step toward restoring pre-pandemic normalcy.

Even as cases began to soar in recent weeks, officials were initially hesitant to tighten social distancing, citing exhaustion and frustration by the public with restrictions and their impact on livelihoods. But as the contagious delta variant reduced the effectiveness of vaccines and most people in their 60s or older are still waiting for their booster shots, and the first cases of omicron were discovered, the sense of urgency became apparent.

Prime Minister Kim Boo-kyum, the No. 2 behind President Moon Jae-in, said during a virus meeting that the country could be forced to take further “extraordinary” measures if it fails to slow the spread of the virus soon.

Officials issued administrative orders requiring hospitals around the country to designate 2,000 more beds combined for COVID-19 treatment.

The increased capacity will be used to ease the crush on hospitals in Seoul and the nearby metropolitan region, where around 90% of intensive care units are already occupied. Officials said more than 1,200 virus patients in the greater capital area who required hospitalization were being forced to wait at home as of Friday morning because of bed shortages.

Officials have revamped their medical response policy so that most mild cases can be treated at home. While around 20,500 are receiving home care, some doctors’ groups say the new approach puts lives at risk.

Kim said the government will also speed up the administration of booster shots by shortening the interval between the second and third vaccine injections from the current four or five months to three months starting next week.

“If it becomes clear that we aren’t succeeding in reversing this crisis situation within the next few days, the government will have no other choice but to employ extraordinary anti-virus measures, including strong social distancing,” he said.

South Korea has reported a daily average of more than 5,800 infections while adding more than 41,000 cases in the past seven days alone, pushing the national caseload to 503,000. The country’s death toll stood at 4,130 after 53 virus patients died in the past 24 hours.

In allowing larger social gatherings, longer indoor dining hours at restaurants and fully reopening schools in November, officials predicted that the country’s improving vaccination rates will help suppress hospitalizations and fatalities even if the virus continues to spread.

However, serious cases and deaths have soared among people in their 60s or older, including those whose immunities have waned after being inoculated early in the vaccine rollout that began in February.

Around 41.5 million people, or 81% of the population of over 51 million, have been fully vaccinated, but only 10% have received booster shots.

The new rules enforced this week ban private gatherings of seven or more people in the greater capital area and require adults to verify their vaccination status at restaurants and other indoor venues. But Kim said such measures haven’t yet showed an effect in slowing transmissions.

Deputy Health Minister Lee Ki-il said officials may further reduce the limit on social gatherings and re-

store business-hour restrictions at restaurants and bars that were lifted in November if things continue to look bad next week.

"We will try our best to avoid a lockdown," Lee said.

Some experts have called for stronger measures, such as forcing employers to use remote work and increasing government spending to support small business owners in the devastated service industry to ensure compliance with social distancing rules.

South Korea has also tightened its borders to fend off the new omicron variant since identifying its first cases last week that were linked to arrivals from Nigeria. The KDCA said health workers confirmed three more omicron infections on Friday, bringing the tally to 63.

Scientists say it's not yet clear whether omicron is more contagious or dangerous than previous strains of the virus.

Palestinians freed after hunger strikes have lifelong damage

By JACK JEFFERY Associated Press

SILAT AL-DHAHR, West Bank (AP) — A year after being released from an Israeli prison following a 103-day hunger strike, Maher al-Akhras is barely able to walk. Frequent bouts of dizziness and sensitivity to noise mean he can neither enjoy social occasions nor return to work on his ancestral farm in the occupied West Bank.

Back home, he is seen as a hero of the Palestinian cause, one of a small group of hunger strikers who have secured release from Israeli detention. But the mental and physical damage from the prolonged hunger strike has left him and others like him unable to resume normal lives, and reliant on long-term medical care.

"My balance is gone," said al-Akhras. "I can't walk among the cows, I can't hold them, I can't milk them."

Palestinian prisoners have long used hunger strikes to pressure Israel to improve the conditions of their detention or to secure their release after being held without charges for months or years under a policy known as administrative detention.

Israel is currently holding some 4,600 Palestinians, including hardened militants who have carried out deadly attacks, as well as individuals arrested at protests or for throwing stones. Around 450 Palestinians are currently being held in administrative detention, and in the last two years at least 11 have used prolonged hunger strikes to secure early release.

Israel says administrative detention is needed to prevent attacks or to keep dangerous suspects locked up without sharing evidence that could endanger valuable intelligence sources. Al-Akhras has been tried and convicted twice in military courts for his involvement with the Islamic Jihad militant group, which Israel and Western countries consider a terrorist organization.

Palestinians and rights groups say administrative detention denies prisoners the right to due process, allowing them to be held indefinitely without seeing the evidence against them or even getting a trial in military courts. The 2.5 million Palestinians in the West Bank, even those in areas administered by the Palestinian Authority, live under Israeli military rule.

Lengthy hunger strikes draw international attention and stoke protests in the occupied territories, putting pressure on Israel to meet the prisoners' demands. The death of a hunger striker in custody would likely spark wider unrest and demonstrations among Palestinians.

"Hunger strikes are particularly effective in the case of administrative detainees because this is a detention completely outside of the judicial process," said Jessica Montell, director of HaMoked, an Israeli human rights group.

As hunger strikers' health deteriorates, they are transferred to Israeli hospitals under guard. They drink water, and medics encourage them to take vitamins, but many, like al-Akhras, refuse. No Palestinian in Israeli detention has died as a result of hunger strikes, but doctors say prolonged vitamin deficiency can cause permanent brain damage.

"If a person has severe vitamin B deficiency, they can develop chronic neurological problems including

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vertigo, dizziness, sluggish thinking, and severe memory problems," said Dr. Bettina Birmanns, a neurologist and the director of the Public Committee Against Torture in Israel, a local rights group. Prolonged periods of starvation will also cause the body to eat away at proteins from the skeleton and heart, she said.

A year after his release from administrative detention, al-Akhras says he has regained all the weight he lost but struggles to read or walk in a straight line.

Ahmed Ghannam, a former car dealer from the southern West Bank, went on a nearly 100-day hunger strike in 2019 to protest against his fourth stint in administrative detention. He had previously been convicted once for involvement with the Islamic militant group Hamas, and once for complicity with the Iranian-backed Hezbollah militia. After his release, he was diagnosed with weakened heart muscle and the early stages of type 2 diabetes.

Critics say Israel is careful to ensure that the hunger strikers do not become martyrs, either by giving into their demands once they are incapacitated or by taking emergency measures that can include force-feeding. Force-feeding patients who are mentally sound is widely seen by medical professionals as a violation of patient autonomy akin to torture.

During the 1970s and 1980s, several Palestinian hunger strikers died after being force-fed by the Israeli authorities, resulting in the practice being outlawed. However, an Israeli law passed in 2015 over the objections of the medical community allows a judge to sanction force-feeding in some circumstances. It's unclear if the law has ever been invoked.

Shany Shapiro, the spokeswoman for Israel's Kaplan hospital, said force-feeding has never been used on any hunger strikers that have been transferred there and that other life-saving treatments are preferred, such as infusions.

"Before any form of intervention is undertaken, there is an ethics committee that takes into account the wants of the prisoner," she said.

Before reaching that point, former prisoners say agents from Israel's internal security service, the Shin Bet, visited their hospital rooms and pressed them to end their strikes. Ghannam and al-Akhras say agents tempted them with food and threatened them with home demolitions or travel restrictions for family members.

The Shin Bet did not respond to a request for comment.

Marathon hunger strikers receive a hero's welcome back home, where they are seen as icons of resilience in the face of a 54-year occupation with no end in sight. Kayed Fafous, who led a five-man hunger strike and was released last month, has since done a string of TV interviews.

Al-Akhras also became a local celebrity. "People stop me in the street and ask for pictures," he said.

But for most hunger strikers, the fame quickly fades while the health consequences linger.

Anani Sarahneh, the spokeswoman for the Palestinian Prisoners Club, which represents former and current prisoners, said it is providing support for around 60 former hunger strikers with various psychological and medical ailments.

Ghannam, who was released in 2019, said he has struggled to find steady employment to support his wife and two young sons, alongside his mounting medical bills.

"I don't regret my decision, but I regret the other problems it has caused," he said.

New UK mask rules start as Johnson under fire over parties

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Tighter restrictions to curb the coronavirus came into force in Britain on Friday, as the government faced new allegations that officials flouted rules they had imposed on the nation with lockdown-breaking parties last Christmas.

Face masks are once again compulsory in indoor public spaces in England under the measures British Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced this week to slow the spread of the new omicron virus variant. Vaccination passes will be needed for nightclubs and large events starting next week, and residents will be told to work from home, if possible.

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The emergence of omicron, which is spreading quickly in Britain, has shaken the government's hopes that vaccinations would be enough to keep the virus in check. British scientists and officials say omicron spreads more quickly than the currently dominant delta variant and likely is more resistant to current vaccines. It is not yet clear whether it causes more severe, or milder, cases of COVID-19.

Along with the new restrictions, the British government is offering everyone 18 and up a third, booster dose of vaccine to try to slow the spread of the virus.

The return of restrictions is unwelcome for many, and revelations of apparent rule-breaking by government officials during tough lockdowns last winter have heightened opposition to the new measures.

The government has asked Britain's most senior civil servant to investigate several gatherings, including a Dec. 18, 2020, event at the prime minister's 10 Downing St. offices, where staff reportedly enjoyed wine, food, games and a festive gift exchange at a time when pandemic regulations banned most social gatherings.

Multiple media outlets reported Friday that one of Johnson's most senior advisers, Director of Communications Jack Doyle, attended the Dec. 18 party and gave awards to staff members. At the time, he was the deputy communications director.

In his current role, Doyle has directed the government's public statements about the party allegations. For several days, Johnson's office denied a party had taken place and insisted rules had been followed at all times.

That claim unraveled when a leaked video showed senior staff members joking about the alleged party. The most senior official in the video, Allegra Stratton, apologized and resigned on Wednesday.

"It's been a difficult week for the government," Paul Scully, the U.K.'s small business minister, said Friday adding that the investigation needed to "get to the bottom" of the allegations.

"We want to see beyond doubt that there were no rules broken, which is what the assurances have been to the prime minister, and that's what I've heard," Scully told the BBC. "I wasn't there. I don't know."

The Christmas party claims are the latest in a string of allegations of rule-breaking and ethics violations by Johnson and government officials. On Thursday, Britain's electoral watchdog fined the prime minister's Conservative Party 17,800 pounds (\$23,500) for failing to keep a proper record of money from a donor that was used to refurbish Johnson's official residence.

Wes Streeting, health spokesman for the opposition Labour Party, said the stream of allegations undermined trust in the government during a public health crisis.

Streeting blamed Johnson, saying "it's his untrustworthy nature, his disorganization, his dishonesty, which is undermining trust in public health measures."

"Boris Johnson's character and behavior starts to undermine a whole series of things: the system of standards in Parliament, the way the law is applied in the country and crucially, whether the government can get its message across about public health at a critical time," Streeting said.

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

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Biden to focus on elections, media as democracy summit wraps

By AAMER MADHANI and COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden is looking to close his two-day virtual Summit for Democracy on Friday by shining a spotlight on the importance of election integrity, countering authoritarian regimes and bolstering independent media.

On the summit's first day, Biden announced plans for the U.S. to spend up to \$424 million around the world to support independent media, anti-corruption work and more. The initiative came as he called on world leaders to work with him to reverse what he called an alarming diminishment of democracy around the globe.

"Will we allow the backward slide of rights and democracy to continue unchecked?" Biden said Thursday. "Or will we together — together — have a vision ... and courage to once more lead the march of human progress and human freedom forward?"

The president is scheduled to deliver closing remarks to leaders and civil society groups on Friday af-

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ternoon.

Biden didn't mention either China or Russia by name as he opened the summit. But he has repeatedly made a case that the U.S. and like-minded allies need to show the world that democracies are a far better vehicle for societies than autocracies. It is a central tenet of Biden's foreign policy outlook — one that he vowed would be more outward looking than his predecessor Trump's "America First" approach.

Biden underscored that even long-established democracies, like the United States, haven't been immune to the strains.

"Here in the United States we know as well as anyone that renewing our democracy and strengthening our democratic institutions requires constant effort," Biden said.

Thursday's video gathering drew backlash from the United States' chief adversaries and other nations that were not invited.

The ambassadors to the U.S. from China and Russia, two countries that did not receive invitations, wrote a joint essay describing the Biden administration as exhibiting a "Cold-War mentality" that will "stoke up ideological confrontation and a rift in the world." The administration also faced scrutiny over how it went about deciding which countries to invite.

Other leaders at the summit delivered their own remarks on the state of democracy — many prerecorded — often reflecting on the stress that rapidly evolving technology is having on their nations. They also bemoaned the increase of disinformation campaigns aimed at undermining institutions and elections.

"The democratic conversation is changing," said Denmark's Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen. "New technologies and large tech companies are increasingly setting the stage for the democratic dialogue, sometimes with more emphasis on reach than on freedom of speech."

The summit comes as Biden is pressing Russia's Vladimir Putin to step back after a massive buildup of troops on the Ukraine border that has created growing concern in Washington and European capitals as well as Ukraine itself. Biden on Wednesday said that he warned Putin of "severe consequences" if Russia invaded.

Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who took part in Thursday's summit and later spoke by phone with Biden, said on Twitter, "Democracy is not a given, it must be fought for."

Poland's Andrzej Duda spoke out against Russia in his address, decrying Moscow and its support of Belarus.

Poland and Western allies have accused Russian ally Belarus of using migrants as pawns to destabilize the European Union in retaliation for its sanctions on his authoritarian regime. Hundreds of migrants, mostly from the Middle East, have flocked to the Belarus-Poland border.

Poland "took on a commitment to be a support for democracy in Eastern Europe," Duda said. "It is a beautiful task, but it has its consequences. It has made us the target of the Kremlin propaganda."

Putin made no public comment on the summit Thursday as he took part in his own video call with members of the Kremlin council for human rights.

Biden has said passage of his ambitious domestic agenda at home — 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 more on shoring up democracy at home. One early test came Thursday as the House approved 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 — largely backed by Democrats. All three are expected to be stalled by Republicans in the Senate.

"Here in the United States, we know that our democracy is not immune from threats," Vice President Kamala Harris said in remarks to close out the first day of the summit that referenced the insurrection at the Capitol in January. "Jan. 6 looms large in our collective conscience, and the anti-voter laws that many states have passed are part of an intentional effort to exclude Americans from participating in our democracy."

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 along with India and Brazil.

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Chinese officials have offered a stream of public criticism about the summit. They have also expressed outrage over the administration inviting Taiwan to take part. China claims the self-governing island as part of its territory and objects to it having contacts on its own with foreign governments.

Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan declined to attend the conference. In a statement issued ahead of the meeting, the foreign ministry said, "We value our partnership with the U.S., which we wish to expand both bilaterally as well as in terms of regional and international cooperation."

Yet Pakistan's relationship with the U.S. has been fraught with suspicion on both sides. Islamabad has balked at Washington's often-stated criticism that Pakistan has not been a reliable partner in the war on terror, accusing it of harboring the Taliban even as that group fought a U.S.-led coalition. Pakistan says it has lost 70,000 people to the war on terror since 2001 and is ready to be a partner in peace but not in war.

Other uninvited countries have also shown their displeasure. Hungary, the only European Union member not invited, tried unsuccessfully to block the EU Commission's president from speaking on behalf of the bloc at the summit. Last year, Biden referred to Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban as a "thug."

Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijarto dismissed the summit as a "domestic political-type of event," where countries whose leaders had a good relationship with Trump were not invited.

Associated Press writers Lisa Mascaro in Washington, Justin Spike in Budapest, Munir Ahmed in Islamabad, Vladimir Isachenkov in Moscow and video producer Liu Zheng in Beijing contributed to this report.

Pro Bowler, Super Bowl champ Demaryius Thomas dies at 33

By PAUL NEWBERRY AP Sports Writer

ATLANTA (AP) — Demaryius Thomas, who earned five straight Pro Bowl honors and a Super Bowl ring during a prolific receiving career spent mostly with the Denver Broncos, has died at the age of 33.

Thomas was found dead in his suburban Atlanta home Thursday night, said Officer Tim Lupo, public information officer for the police department in Roswell, Georgia.

"Preliminary information is that his death stems from a medical issue, and our investigators currently have no reason to believe otherwise," Lupo said in a statement early Friday.

LaTonya Bonseigneur, a first cousin who grew up with Thomas and was so close they considered themselves siblings, told The Associated Press the family believes he died from a seizure.

Family members were notified by the Roswell police at about 9 p.m. EST that they had found Thomas in a shower at his home.

"He had been suffering from seizures for over a year, and we believe he had a seizure when he was showering," Bonseigneur said early Friday. "We're not sure when he died. We just spoke with him yesterday."

She added, "He was alone and a friend couldn't get hold of him, so he called his driver, who has a key because of these seizures, and he went into his home and found him in the shower."

Thomas last played in the NFL in 2019, appearing in 11 games with 10 starts for the New York Jets. He officially announced his retirement this past June.

He will be remembered mostly for his eight-plus seasons with the Broncos.

"We are devastated and completely heartbroken," the team said in a statement. "We were very much looking forward to celebrating Demaryius for years to come as one of the greatest players in franchise history."

His contributions to the community went beyond the playing field, the team said, noting his work with the Broncos Boys and Girls Club, hospital visits, his annual football camp and "many other genuine interactions."

"Demaryius' humility, warmth, kindness and infectious smile will always be remembered by those who knew him and loved him," the statement said. "We have lost an incredible player and a special person in Demaryius Thomas."

While he put up huge numbers after the Broncos signed quarterback Peyton Manning in 2012, Thomas made his best-known catch the previous season, his second year in the league.

On the first play of overtime in an AFC wild-card playoff game, he broke free over the middle and hauled

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in an 80-yard touchdown from Tim Tebow to beat the Pittsburgh Steelers.

A native of Montrose, a tiny town in southeast Georgia, Thomas managed to make his mark collegiately as a receiver at Georgia Tech — even after the school hired Paul Johnson to replace Chan Gailey as coach.

Ditching Gailey's pro-style offense, Johnson installed the run-oriented scheme that had been so successful for him at lower-division Georgia Southern.

Despite a huge drop-off in the number of passes the Yellow Jackets threw, Thomas was often left in single coverage and managed to show off the skills that would lead the Broncos to take him with the No. 22 overall pick in the 2010 draft.

Thomas finished his career at Georgia Tech with 120 receptions for 2,339 yards and 14 touchdowns in three seasons.

Teaming up with Manning, Thomas put up much gaudier numbers for the Broncos beginning with a dazzling 2012 season — 94 catches for 1,434 yards and 10 touchdowns — that led to the first of those five straight Pro Bowl selections.

He twice had more than 100 catches in a season, highlighted by career bests of 111 catches and 1,619 yards in 2014. He had five consecutive seasons with more than 1,000 yards receiving.

In Manning's final year, the Broncos defeated Carolina in the Super Bowl to cap the 2015 season.

The Broncos also made the Super Bowl during the 2013 season, piling up the greatest offensive numbers in NFL history.

But they went down with a whimper in the title game, routed by the Seattle Seahawks 43-8 even though Thomas set a then-Super Bowl record with 13 receptions, totaling 118 yards.

"If we all played like he did, we'd have won," Denver general manager John Elway moaned.

When the Broncos returned to the Super Bowl two years later, Thomas' mother got a chance to watch him in person rather than on a prison television.

Nicknamed "Bay Bay" as a child after the animated movie "Bébé's Kids," Thomas was 11 when police burst into his home and arrested his mother, Katina Smith, and grandmother, Minnie Pearl Thomas, on drug charges.

Katina Smith was sentenced to 20 years in prison after refusing a lesser term in exchange for testifying against her mother, who wound up receiving a life sentence.

"I think that drives me more to know that they're there and they're watching me," Thomas said before his first Super Bowl. "I try to go out there and play my best because they're going to talk about it to the people in the jailhouse."

Both women would be freed by President Barack Obama under an initiative to reduce the number of non-violent drug offenders doing time.

Smith was released in time to watch from the stands as her son won a championship. The first thing she asked him for after prison was a Sony Walkman.

"I don't even know if you can find a Walkman right now," Thomas told her.

He got her an iPhone instead. Before long, she was texting like a teenager and calling her son all the time.

One of Thomas' teammates on the Super Bowl-winning team expressed shock at the news of his untimely death.

"Heartbroken," former Broncos defensive star DeMarcus Ware wrote on Twitter, posting a picture of the two together.

Similar sentiments came in from current and former players around the league.

"RIP Young Legend," Seattle Seahawks quarterback Russell Wilson tweeted.

"I'm just shocked to hear that Demaryius Thomas has died," former Broncos running back Terrell Davis wrote. "Gone way to soon."

"My heart is hurting right now," Broncos Hall of Famer Steve Atwater said. "We'll never forget you my brother."

After Manning's retirement, Thomas' production began to decline as the Broncos struggled to settle on their next quarterback.

Then, during the 2018 season, he was traded to the Houston Texans. He managed only 23 catches in seven games with his new team and was released after that brief tenure.

Thomas signed with the New England Patriots, but was cut before their opener. He finished up with the Jets.

In 143 career games, Thomas had 724 catches for 9,763 yards and 63 touchdowns.

Thomas was not married and had no children, according to Bonseigneur. After his mother went to prison, he lived with an uncle, James Brown.

Brown died on Nov. 15 of a heart attack at age 69. Thomas attended his funeral.

"Demaryius was a great guy," Bonseigneur said. "He came from humble beginnings. He knew God. He was raised in the church and by a close-knit family. Even though he rose to stardom, to us he was just a kid from Montrose. We never fathomed he would go on to do all these amazing things. He was just a kid who loved playing football."

Follow Paul Newberry on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/pnewberry1963> and find his work at <https://apnews.com/search/paulnewberry>

AP Sports Writers Arnie Stapleton and Pat Graham in Denver contributed to this report.

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Jussie Smollett guilty verdict latest in polarizing case

By DON BABWIN and SARA BURNETT Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — Jussie Smollett's conviction for lying to police about a racist, homophobic attack came nearly three years after his report of a horrifying hate crime quickly became part of a polarized political landscape, with people — including the president of the United States — weighing in from all over.

A prosecutor said Thursday's verdict was "a resounding message by the jury that Mr. Smollett did exactly what we said he did" — recruit two brothers to fake an attack so it could be recorded by a surveillance camera and posted on social media for publicity.

The brothers testified that the former "Empire" actor paid them \$3,500 for the hoax and gave them lines to yell, including about "MAGA country," an apparent reference to then-President Donald Trump's "Make America Great Again" slogan.

The report made headlines around the world and prompted a massive manhunt in Chicago, with roughly two dozen police joining the investigation. It also drew criticism from Trump, who called the police department's handling of the case "an absolute embarrassment to our country."

"Not only did Mr. Smollett lie to the police and wreak havoc here in the city for weeks on end for no reason whatsoever, but then he compounded the problem by lying under oath to a jury," special prosecutor Dan Webb said after Thursday's verdict.

Smollett, who is Black and gay, maintained throughout the nearly three-year legal battle that he was attacked in downtown Chicago in January 2019 by people who yelled racist and anti-gay slurs and put a noose around his neck.

His attorney declared Smollett's innocence again Thursday after the jury found him guilty on five of six counts of disorderly conduct for lying to police. Nenyé Uche said Smollett would appeal the conviction, and is "100% confident" his name will be cleared by an appellate court.

"Unfortunately we were facing an uphill battle where Jussie was already tried and convicted in the media and then we had to somehow get the jury to forget or unsee all the news stories that they had been hearing that were negative for the last three years," Uche told reporters after the verdict.

The jury convicted the 39-year-old on five counts of disorderly conduct — for each separate time he was charged with lying to police in the days after the alleged attack. He was acquitted on a sixth count,

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of lying to a detective in mid-February, weeks after Smollett said he was attacked.

Smollett stood and faced the jury, showing no visible reaction as the verdict was read. He and his family later left the courthouse without comment.

Judge James Linn set a post-trial hearing for Jan. 27, and said he would schedule Smollett's sentencing at a later date. Disorderly conduct is a class 4 felony that carries a prison sentence of up to three years, but experts have said if convicted, Smollett would likely be placed on probation and ordered to perform community service.

The damage to his personal and professional life may be more severe. Smollett lost his role on the TV program "Empire," which was filmed in Chicago, after prosecutors said the alleged attack was a hoax, and he told jurors earlier this week, "I've lost my livelihood."

The jury deliberated for just over nine hours Wednesday and Thursday after a roughly one-week trial.

Smollett testified that he was the victim of a real hate crime, telling jurors "there was no hoax." He called the brothers who testified against him "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 didn't like "who he was." They also alleged the brothers made up the story about the attack being staged to get money from Smollett, and that they said they wouldn't testify against him if Smollett paid them each \$1 million.

Asked Thursday if Smollett could be charged with perjury for lying on the witness stand, Webb said perjury charges "generally" don't happen after a defendant is convicted, but that it was unclear what would happen in Smollett's case.

He also said the Chicago Police Department was vindicated by the jury's verdict.

"A lot of times people say, 'Well, police officers sweep things under the rug.' This police department responded by absolutely testifying in this trial that they took it seriously," Webb said. "They believed he was a victim of a crime and they worked so hard for the next three weeks."

But Uche said Chicago police should have investigated the case "much more," and that there were some witnesses who were never interviewed.

He called the jury's split verdict "inconsistent," saying it made no sense for Smollett to be convicted of five counts but not the sixth charge, since "everything stems from one incident."

An attorney for Abimbola and Olabingo Osundairo, the brothers who testified against Smollett, said her clients "could not be more thrilled and pleased with the results."

Chicago police "got this one right," Gloria Rodriguez said.

Associated Press reporter Sophia Tareen contributed to this report.

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

Ukrainian military long on morale but short on weaponry

By YURAS KARMAU Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — When Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula and threw its support behind separatists in the country's east more than seven years ago, Kyiv's underfunded and disorganized armed forces struggled to mount a credible response.

Now, amid fears that a Russian troop buildup near Ukraine's border could signal a possible attack, military experts say Moscow would face stronger resistance this time. But they emphasize that Ukraine would be well short of what it needs to counter Russia's overwhelming land, sea and air superiority.

Still, years of fighting the separatists have given Ukrainian veterans like Col. Viacheslav Vlasenko the battlefield experience for such a fight.

"In case of Russian aggression. I will have no choice — every Ukrainian is ready to die with arms in hands," said the highly decorated 53-year-old Vlasenko. "Ukraine will never become a part of Russia. If we have

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to prove it to the Kremlin that Ukraine has the right for freedom and independence, we are ready for it.”

While Western military assistance has remained limited, Ukraine still received state-of-the-art foreign weaponry, including sophisticated U.S. anti-tank missiles and Turkish drones to provide a heavier punch than they had in years past.

Vlasenko, who spent 4 1/2 years battling the rebels in the east in a conflict that has killed more than 14,000 people, said the country now has thousands of highly motivated and battle-hardened troops.

“We Ukrainians are defending our land, and there is no place for us to retreat,” said Vlasenko, adding that he takes his 13-year-old son to target practice so that he knows “who our enemy is and learns to defend himself and fight back.”

Earlier this week, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy praised Ukraine’s soldiers on a visit to an area near the conflict zone to mark a military holiday.

“Ukrainian servicemen are continuing to perform their most important mission — to protect the freedom and sovereignty of the state from the Russian aggressor,” Zelenskyy said.

U.S. intelligence officials have determined that Russia has moved 70,000 troops near Ukraine’s 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 smear campaign.

On Tuesday, U.S. President Joe Biden warned Russian President Vladimir Putin in a video conference that Moscow would face “economic consequences like you’ve never seen” if it invades Ukraine, although he noted that Washington would not deploy its military forces there.

Putin reaffirmed his denial of planning to attack Ukraine but emphasized that NATO’s possible expansion to Ukraine was a “red line” for Moscow.

If Russia attacks its neighbor, the 1 million-member Russian military would inevitably overwhelm Ukraine’s armed forces, which number about 255,000. But in addition to a promised heavy economic blow from Western sanctions, Russia would also stand to suffer significant military losses that would dent Putin’s image at home.

Ukrainian veterans and military analysts say the country won’t surrender territory without a fight this time, unlike in 2014 in Crimea, where Russian troops in unmarked uniforms faced virtually no resistance in overtaking the Black Sea peninsula.

“Ukraine will not become easy prey for the Russians. There will be a bloodbath,” Vlasenko said. “Putin will get hundreds and thousands of coffins floating from Ukraine to Russia.”

Weeks after annexing Crimea, Russia began supporting the separatist uprising in Ukraine’s eastern industrial heartland, known as the Donbas. Ukraine and the West have accused Russia of supplying the rebels with troops and weapons — accusations that Moscow has denied, saying that any Russians fighting there were volunteers.

A series of bruising military defeats forced Ukraine to sign a 2015 peace agreement brokered by France and Germany that envisaged broad autonomy for the separatist regions and a sweeping amnesty for the rebels. The deal that was seen by many in Ukraine as a betrayal of its national interests. While it has helped end large-scale fighting, frequent skirmishes have continued amid a political deadlock as Ukraine and Russia have traded accusations.

Mykola Sunhurovskyi, a top military analyst for the Kyiv-based Razumkov Center independent think-tank, said the Ukrainian military has made much progress in recent years, thanks to Western-equipment and training.

“The army today is much stronger than it was in early 2014, and Russia will face serious resistance,” he said.

The Western aid included Javelin anti-tank missiles and patrol boats supplied by the United States. The U.S. and other NATO forces have conducted joint drills with the Ukrainian military in exercises that have vexed Russia. Last month, Ukraine signed an agreement with the U.K. for building naval bases on the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov.

Still, Sunhurovskyi argued that the Western assistance is not enough.

"The military aid given by the West is far from what Ukraine needs," Sunhurovskyi said, adding that its slow pace was also a key problem. "The assistance is needed within two months, not two or three years. There are huge gaps in the Ukrainian military potential that need to be taken care of."

He pointed in particular to Ukraine's air defenses.

"The air defense system isn't ready for repelling massive airstrikes by Russia," Sunhurovskyi said, adding that Ukraine also lacks advanced electronic warfare systems and has a shortage of artillery and missiles.

Morale is not a problem, he said.

"From the point of view of combat spirit, Ukraine is ready for war, but there are issues with the technological level of the Ukrainian military, which is below what is needed to deter Russia from launching an attack," he said.

Zelenskyy said Ukraine's military "has come a difficult way to the creation of a highly capable and highly organized combat structure that is confident of its potential and capable of derailing any aggressive plans by the enemy." On Thursday, he spoke with Biden, who briefed him on the discussion with Putin.

The analysts also said Russia would have to be prepared for a nationwide resistance campaign from Ukrainian veterans after any invasion.

"If it launches an aggression, Russia will face a large-scale guerrilla war in Ukraine, and the infrastructure for it has already been set," said Volodymyr Fesenko, head of the Kyiv-based Penta think tank. "Thousands of Ukrainian soldiers served in the east, and there is a local hero in every courtyard who fought the separatists and the Russians."

Vladimir Isachenkov in Moscow contributed.

The AP Interview: General says US troops to remain in Iraq

By LOLITA C. BALDOR AND ROBERT BURNS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The top U.S. commander for the Middle East said Thursday that the United States will keep the current 2,500 troops in Iraq for the foreseeable future, and he warned that he expects increasing attacks on U.S. and Iraqi personnel by Iranian-backed militias determined to get American forces out.

Marine Gen. Frank McKenzie said in an interview with The Associated Press at the Pentagon that despite the shift by U.S. forces to a non-combat role in Iraq, they will still provide air support and other military aid for Iraq's fight against the Islamic State.

Noting that Iranian-backed militias want all Western forces out of Iraq, he said an ongoing uptick in violence may continue through December.

"They actually want all U.S. forces to leave, and all U.S. forces are not going to leave," he said, adding that as a result, "that may provoke a response as we get later into the end of the month."

The Iraqi government earlier Thursday announced the conclusion of talks on ending the U.S. combat mission against IS. U.S. forces have been largely in an advisory role for some time, so the announced transition changes little. The announcement reflects a July decision by the Biden administration to end the U.S. combat mission in Iraq by Dec. 31.

"We've drawn down from bases we didn't need, we've made it harder to get at us. But the Iraqis still want us to be there. They still want the presence, they still want the engagement," said McKenzie. "So as long as they want it, and we can mutually agree that's the case — we're going to be there."

He said he believes Islamic State militants will continue to be a threat in Iraq and that the group will "keep recreating itself, perhaps under a different name." The key, he said, will be to ensure that IS is not able to coalesce with other elements around the globe and become increasingly strong and dangerous.

America invaded Iraq in 2003, and at the peak point had more than 170,000 troops battling insurgents in the country and later working to train and advise Iraqi forces. All U.S. forces were withdrawn at the end of 2011, but just three years later, American troops were back to help Iraq beat back the Islamic State group, which had swept across the border from Syria to gain control of a large swath of the country.

The U.S. presence in Iraq has long been a flash point for Tehran, but tensions spiked after a January

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2020 U.S. drone strike near the Baghdad airport killed a top Iranian general. In retaliation, Iran launched a barrage of missiles at al-Asad airbase, where U.S. troops were stationed. More than 100 service members suffered traumatic brain injuries in the blasts.

More recently, Iranian proxies are believed responsible for an assassination attempt last month on Iraq's Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi. And officials have said they believe Iran was behind the October drone attack at the military outpost in southern Syria where American troops are based. No U.S. personnel were killed or injured in the attack.

"I think an attack to kill the prime minister is a pretty significant event," McKenzie said. "I think that's a signpost of the desperation that they're under right now." Iranian officials have said Tehran and its allies had nothing to do with last month's drone attack that lightly injured the Iraqi prime minister.

McKenzie, who has headed U.S. Central Command for nearly three years and traveled extensively throughout the region, painted a picture that reflected the recent upheaval in Afghanistan, where U.S. troops departed at the end of August.

On Afghanistan, McKenzie said the al-Qaida extremist group has grown slightly since U.S. forces left and that the ruling Taliban leaders are divided about their 2020 pledge to break ties with the group. He said the departure of the U.S. military and intelligence assets from the country has made it "very hard, not impossible" to ensure that neither al-Qaida nor the Islamic State group's Afghanistan affiliate can pose a threat to the United States.

Like the Taliban's long campaign to get Americans out of Afghanistan, Iran and its proxies have battled to get the U.S. out of Iraq and the broader Middle East.

"Iran still pursues a vision of ejecting us," he said. "And they see the principal battleground for that as being in Iraq. And I believe they are under the view that they can increase friction in Iraq to where we will leave."

Iran, he said, believes that campaign won't affect the nuclear negotiations that were long stalled but are now restarting. But, he said, "I think it's a dangerous position for the Iranians to maintain, because I think they're not going to be able to decouple those two things."

McKenzie said that as NATO begins to expand its presence in Iraq as planned, the U.S. will refine its force there. And the total U.S. force presence will depend on future agreements with Iraq's government.

The U.S. troops in Syria, currently numbering about 900, will continue to advise and assist Syrian rebel forces in the fight against IS, McKenzie said. He said it's not clear how much longer that will be necessary but said, "I think we are measurably closer than we were a couple of years ago. I still think we have a ways to go."

More broadly, McKenzie noted that the U.S. troop presence across the Middle East has significantly dropped since last year, when it peaked amid tensions with Iran, at as much as 80,000. The U.S. has identified China and Russia as the top national security threats, labeling China as America's "pacing challenge," and has looked to focus more effort and assets in the Pacific.

In its recent review of the positioning of U.S. forces around the world, the Pentagon said little about removing or repositioning troops in the Middle East. McKenzie and other top military leaders have long worried that the U.S. military is concentrated in too few locations in the Middle East and must disperse more to increase security.

"We think it is important to work with our partners in the region to present a more complex targeting problem to Iran," he said, adding that U.S. will look at other bases and opportunities to move troops around to achieve that goal.

McKenzie said he is particularly concerned by Iran's development of ballistic and cruise missiles as well as armed drones.

"And so those things are very concerning to me because they continue to develop them," he said. "And they show no signs of abating in their research in this field, and their fielding of new and increasingly lethal and capable weapons."

'I am dead here': Lebanese join Mideast migrants to Europe

By BASSEM MROUE ASSOCIATED PRESS

TRIPOLI, Lebanon (AP) — Ziad Hilweh knew his family might die on the way. But the risk was worth it, he said, to reach the shores of Europe for a new start with his wife and three kids, away from the daily humiliation of life in Lebanon.

The country's economic meltdown had destroyed him. The currency crash meant that the value of his salary from working at a private security company fell from \$650 a month to about \$50 after the Lebanese pound lost more than 90% of its value in less than two years. It reached the point the 22-year-old could no longer afford milk and diapers for his children.

But the young father's hopes of a better future were shattered last month, when the boat they were on board headed to Italy broke down in the Mediterranean Sea, hours after they set off from the outskirts of Lebanon's port city of Tripoli. Along with dozens of other would-be migrants on the boat, they were towed back to shore by the navy after a terrifying attempt at escaping.

For years, Lebanon has been a host for refugees, mainly from Syria, but now it is a departure point. Hundreds of Lebanese have tried to reach Europe this year on boats from their country's shores, spurred by a devastating economic crisis that has thrown two thirds of the population into poverty since October 2019.

It is not a route on the scale of the main sea path from Turkey to Greece used by many refugees and migrants. But it is a startling shift as Lebanese join Iraqis, Afghans, Sudanese and other Middle Eastern nationalities in leaving their homelands.

Sea departures from Lebanon have increased starting in 2020, compared to previous years, said Lisa Abou Khaled, spokeswoman for the U.N. refugee agency. According to UNHCR figures, more than 1,570 people embarked or attempted to embark from Lebanon between January and November, most heading for Cyprus. The majority have been Syrians, but Abou Khaled said a notable number of Lebanese have joined them.

"It is evident that these are desperate journeys undertaken by people who see no way of survival in Lebanon," said Abou Khaled.

The country is witnessing a frightening convergence of multiple crises, including political instability, the coronavirus pandemic and a massive explosion at the capital's main port in August last year that have all added to the financial unravelling of the country.

'I AM DEAD HERE'

Hilweh had been growing more desperate with each day. For months, he asked relatives and friends to help him financially. Chatting with friends one night, he heard that smugglers were taking people to Europe, and that some have already made it there.

He and a close friend, Bilal Moussa, decided to give it a try. Hilweh decided to take his wife and children, while Moussa planned to go alone and apply for family reunification once he settles in Europe.

They were told it would cost \$4,000 for each adult and \$2,000 for a child. Hilweh sold his apartment and his car and borrowed some from relatives. He was still short, but the smuggler gave him a discount and took the \$10,000 Hilweh had, instead of \$14,000.

"I am dead here and might die on the way. But if I reach the destination, I can live a decent life," Moussa said.

The smuggler told them to meet at a location near Tripoli's Abu Ali river shortly before midnight on Friday, Nov. 19, and that 70 people would be on the boat. At the location, they were put into a covered produce truck and driven to Qalamoun, just south of Tripoli.

There, at an abandoned resort, they boarded the wooden boat with their belongings. Around midnight, as they left shore, the smuggler began reading the names of people on board.

There were 92, instead of 70, including about two dozen Syrian and Palestinian refugees.

A TERRIFYING RIDE

They quickly ran into trouble. A Lebanese navy ship approached the boat, ordering them through loudspeakers to turn back. The captain ignored their calls and kept moving west.

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The navy ship circled them, causing waves that shook the boat and threw water inside. The shaking grew more violent as the ship drew closer, filling it with more water that pushed it down. The screaming passengers spread out around the boat to balance it and threw bags into the sea to keep it afloat.

Hilweh's wife and children were sitting near the engine, and when the boat flooded with water, thick smoke poured out. His 3-month-old son Karim stopped breathing and almost suffocated, he said.

"He lived and died in front of me," he said, recalling the panic before Karim was breathing again.

"I started reciting the shahada," said Hilweh's wife, Alaa Khodor, 22, referring to the profession of faith in Islam that Muslims recite when close to death.

Eventually, the boat stabilized, and they kept moving west while the navy chased them. Looking at a screen, the boat's captain shouted that they had left Lebanon's territorial waters. Immediately, the navy ship turned back.

"I felt very happy. I am out of Lebanon. I have crossed the line of humiliation," Hilweh recounted. He celebrated by hugging his wife and two daughters, Rana, 3, and Jana, 2.

BACK AND BROKEN

Their relief was short-lived. Shortly before sunrise, the water-logged engine gave out completely. Stalled in the darkness and silence, the frightened passengers frantically called relatives in Lebanon to tell the military they needed help.

Hours later, the Lebanese navy finally arrived and towed the boat back.

"Once the boat stopped, I felt everything go dark, I felt devastated," Hilweh said. "When we arrived back I had tears in my eyes."

Back in Tripoli, the men were separated from the women and children and questioned for hours. The smuggler is still in detention, Hilweh said.

Tripoli is Lebanon's most impoverished city. Its mayor, Riad Yamak, said that last year, several people drowned off the coast of Tripoli while trying to reach Europe.

Last year, a boat taking migrants to Cyprus ran out of diesel and was stranded for eight days, during which at least six persons died. The U.N. peacekeeping forces in Lebanon, known as UNIFIL, rescued the rest and handed them over to Lebanese authorities after giving them first aid.

"This is suicide when someone takes his family by sea," Yamak said.

Hilweh and his wife disagree. They have already lost their apartment, their car and Hilweh's job. They said they will keep trying until they make it to Europe even if this means putting their lives and those of their kids in danger again.

"I will take any danger to get out of here. There is nothing here," Khodor said.

Vikings beat Steelers 36-28, deny last-play pass in end zone

By DAVE CAMPBELL AP Pro Football Writer

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Minnesota Vikings safety Harrison Smith ripped off his helmet once the victory was finally secured, after a 29-point lead on the Pittsburgh Steelers late in the third quarter evaporated into yet another teeth-clenching finish.

Smith looked exhausted and exasperated, hardly excited at all. These Vikings don't make anything easy on themselves.

Dalvin Cook rushed for 205 yards and two touchdowns in his faster-than-expected return from a shoulder injury, and the Vikings held on to beat the Steelers 36-28 by forcing an incomplete pass in the end zone on the final play Thursday night.

Ben Roethlisberger's throw to Pat Freiermuth was on target, but Smith smashed into the rookie tight end at just the right moment to dislodge the ball as Xavier Woods and Anthony Barr converged. That gave the Vikings (6-7) a critical victory after they flirted with an unforgivable loss.

"It is frustrating having to come down to the last second. It's taken a few years of my life this season, but it's good to be on this side of a close one," Barr said.

All but one of Minnesota's games this year have been decided by eight points or less, including four

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losses by three points or fewer.

"Never say 'over' with this team," said coach Mike Zimmer, who watched the Vikings lose 29-27 last week at previously winless Detroit on a last-play touchdown pass.

The Steelers had fared much better in these close finishes this season, but they weren't trying to erase 29-point deficits in those other situations, either.

"We're running out of time," Roethlisberger said. "I don't look at moral victories."

Just as vital as all the turf he tore up on the ground was the 17-yard catch Cook made on a seam route on third-and-9 from the Minnesota 26 with 2:38 left. That forced the Steelers to use all their timeouts, leaving Roethlisberger 96 yards and 2:16 to go after Jordan Berry pinned a punt deep against his former team.

Roethlisberger hit Chase Claypool for 48 yards while Bashaud Breeland was committing pass interference to reach midfield. Claypool pulled in a fourth-and-1 slant to reach the Minnesota 34 but cost the Steelers a handful of seconds by celebrating the first down rather than immediately tossing the ball to the referee.

Diontae Johnson set up the last play from the 12 by taking a crossing route 12 yards out of bounds, but the Steelers (6-6-1), who failed on a 2-point conversion try earlier in the fourth quarter, wound up just short this time. Last week, they hung on to beat Baltimore 20-19 by denying a 2-point try with 12 seconds remaining.

Coach Mike Tomlin wasn't all that impressed by the comeback.

"We were JV again tonight, and I'm talking up front on both sides," Tomlin said.

Star outside linebacker and NFL sack leader T.J. Watt injured his groin early in the second quarter and did not return. The Vikings had a 300-66 advantage in total yards in the first half.

Roethlisberger, who was sacked five times, threw touchdown passes to Najee Harris, James Washington and Freiermuth in the second half. Harris ran for a score, too, as the Steelers recovered from their abysmal start.

Ahkello Witherspoon intercepted Kirk Cousins twice after halftime to fuel the rally. With Adam Thielen sidelined by an ankle injury, Minnesota's passing attack was out of sync.

Cousins went 14 for 31 for 216 yards, hitting Justin Jefferson for a first-quarter touchdown and K.J. Osborn for a 62-yard score early in the fourth quarter that made it 36-20.

"There's some good out there. There's some bad out there. We'll have to go back and watch and see what it really was," Cousins said.

INSTANT COOKING

Just 11 days after Cook dislocated his shoulder, keeping him out of last week's loss at previously winless Detroit, he lined up in the backfield and enjoyed the most running room he's seen all season. Cook set a franchise record with 153 rushing yards in the first half, and he needed only 14 carries to do it. The Steelers are allowing the most average yards per rush (5.0) in the league.

The Vikings trampled the Steelers with their zone blocking scheme, creating gaping holes for Cook to burst through and minimizing the contact with his still-healing shoulder. The Vikings averaged more than 10 yards per play in the first quarter.

"Once I told 'em I'm good, I'm good," Cook said.

JUST WIDE

Minnesota's Greg Joseph pulled a 53-yard field goal left and sent his first extra point try wide right. Chris Boswell also hooked a 49-yard attempt left, just his second missed field goal of the season for Pittsburgh to end a streak of 20 straight makes. This was the first NFL game since at least 1991, as far back as Spor-tradar data goes for this research, with two missed field goals and a missed extra point in the first quarter.

INJURY REPORT

Steelers: CB Joe Haden (foot) missed his fourth straight game. ... John Leglue made his first NFL start, filling in at left guard for B.J. Finney (back). Leglue became the fourth starter at LG this year. ... OLB Alex Highsmith (knee) was hurt in the third quarter and did not return.

Vikings: LT Christian Darrisaw (ankle) sat out for the second straight game. Oli Udoh took Darrisaw's place, and Mason Cole played right guard for Udoh. ... Backup LB Ryan Connelly appeared to seriously injure his knee covering the second half kickoff.

UP NEXT

The Steelers host Tennessee on Dec. 19. They're 4-0-1 in their last five home games.
The Vikings visit Chicago on Dec. 20, giving them 10 full days between games.

More AP NFL coverage: <https://apnews.com/hub/NFL> and https://twitter.com/AP_NFL

Companies rethink return-to-office plans amid omicron cases

By ANNE D'INNOCENZIO Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Companies of all sizes are rethinking their plans to send workers back to the office as the new omicron variant adds another layer of uncertainty.

Alphabet's Google and the nation's second largest automaker Ford Co. are among those once again delaying their return-to-office plans, while other businesses whose employees have already returned are considering adding extra precautions like requiring masks. Officials in the United Kingdom, Denmark, Norway and Sweden also have asked people in recent days to work from home if they can because of concerns about the variant.

Meta, formerly known as Facebook, and ridesharing company Lyft separately announced Tuesday that they're letting workers delay their return when offices fully reopen early next year. Meta still plans to open its headquarters at the end of January but will allow workers to delay their return as late as June. Lyft says it won't require workers to come back to its offices for all of next year, though they will fully reopen as planned in February.

Janelle Gale, vice president of human resources for Meta, said the latest decision recognizes "some aren't quite ready to come back."

The moves are the latest indication of how difficult it is for companies to set firm plans for their employees' mandatory return as worries about a spike in new cases or new variants keep shifting deadlines. This fall, the delta variant spurred many big companies to postpone a mandatory return to early next year.

"A year and a half ago, we thought this would be for a very short time," said Jeff Levin-Scherz, population health leader at Willis Towers Watson, a global advisory firm. "But the pandemic has thrown us many curves, and employers need to continue to be nimble."

The firm's survey of 543 employers with 5.2 million workers showed on average 34% of remote-capable employees remain remote, but that would decline to 27% by the first quarter of 2022. However, the survey was conducted before news of omicron surfaced.

The delayed plans are yet another blow to already struggling restaurants, bars, dry cleaners and other businesses that rely on office workers as patrons. Particularly hard-hit are those in downtown or midtown areas of cities like New York dominated by office buildings that remain largely empty.

The delays come even as U.S. health officials say early indications suggest omicron may be less dangerous than delta, which continues to fuel hospitalizations.

Lawrence Gostin, a public health expert at Georgetown University, doesn't believe there's enough scientific information on omicron to warrant companies delaying their return-to-office plans.

"There will be a constant stream of new variants as well as surges and waning of cases," Gostin said. "We shouldn't disrupt normal business activity at every possible trigger."

He noted that layered protection like masks, vaccinations and ventilation are highly effective at preventing virus spread in a workplace.

Still, the stream of new variants is having a psychological impact on business owners.

"Omicron has made me realize work life will never return to the way it was pre-COVID," said Gisela Girard, president of advertising agency Creative Civilization, whose 12 employees have been working remotely since March 2020. "It made me realize how working from home is likely to keep employees, their families and also our clients safe."

This summer, Girard's company aimed for a mandatory hybrid work plan to start in fall, but delta pushed back those plans to early next year. Now, omicron has her reconsidering not only those plans but whether employees should return at all. She renewed the office lease last year but said she's rethinking the physi-

cal office space.

For companies that have already brought workers back to the office, it's harder to retreat and allow them to be remote again. Still, some are considering new safety measures.

Kent Swig, president of Swig Equities LLC, a privately owned real estate investment and development company in Manhattan, said its 65 employees returned to the office in fall 2020 on a hybrid basis and went to five days a week in the office in May, after all were vaccinated.

However, Swig says he's now closely monitoring the new variant and will consider mandating masks and even requiring COVID-19 testing a few times a week if the threat increases. He said he will reverse course and start hybrid or remote work if the situation gets worse.

"My first and foremost job is to protect all my staff," Swig said. "I am going to err on the side of caution."

Levin-Scherz noted many employers have set multiple dates for return to the workplace over the past year, and at this point are looking to resolve more uncertainty before they set new dates.

Target CEO Brian Cornell recently told The Associated Press that it's "avoiding putting dates on the calendar" for a mandated return to its Minneapolis headquarters. Target started gradually opening collaboration areas and workspaces in the fall for employees who wanted an option to work on-site.

"We're going to learn along the way and make sure we make the right steps for our team," Cornell said.

Lyft said the decision to let workers choose to work remotely for all of 2022 wasn't tied exclusively to omicron but said new variants are a factor contributing to uncertainty.

"We've heard from our team members that they value continued flexibility in determining where they work and would benefit from additional time to plan," said Ashley Adams, a Lyft spokeswoman.

Meanwhile, Google is indefinitely delaying the mandatory return to its offices. A company spokesperson said in an email that the update was in line with its earlier guidance that a return would start no sooner than Jan. 10 and depend on local conditions. The company said it safely opened more than 90% of its U.S. offices and nearly 40% of U.S. workers came into the office in recent weeks.

Ford said Monday that it will delay plans for hybrid work at its Dearborn, Michigan, headquarters until March and plans to start a pilot phase for select employees in February. It had previously said it wouldn't start the hybrid work model before January.

Ford said that the hybrid work model affects approximately 18,000 employees in North America. Hourly manufacturing employees returned to work in May 2020.

Follow Anne D'Innocenzio: <http://twitter.com/ADInnocenzio>

Pandemic mystery: Scientists focus on COVID's animal origins

By LAURA UNGAR AP Science Writer

Nearly two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, the origin of the virus tormenting the world remains shrouded in mystery.

Most scientists believe it emerged in the wild and jumped from bats to humans, either directly or through another animal. Others theorize it escaped from a Chinese lab.

Now, with the global COVID-19 death toll surpassing 5.2 million on the second anniversary of the earliest human cases, a growing chorus of scientists is trying to keep the focus on what they regard as the more plausible "zoonotic," or animal-to-human, theory, in the hope that what's learned will help humankind fend off new viruses and variants.

"The lab-leak scenario gets a lot of attention, you know, on places like Twitter," but "there's no evidence that this virus was in a lab," said University of Utah scientist Stephen Goldstein, who with 20 others wrote an article in the journal *Cell* in August laying out evidence for animal origin.

Michael Worobey, an evolutionary biologist at the University of Arizona who contributed to the article, had signed a letter with other scientists last spring saying both theories were viable. Since then, he said, his own and others' research has made him even more confident than he had been about the animal hypothesis, which is "just way more supported by the data."

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Last month, Worobey published a COVID-19 timeline linking the first known human case to the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market in Wuhan, China, where live animals were sold.

"The lab leak idea is almost certainly a huge distraction that's taking focus away from what actually happened," he said.

Others aren't so sure. Over the summer, a review ordered by President Joe Biden showed that four U.S. intelligence agencies believed with low confidence that the virus was initially transmitted from an animal to a human, and one agency believed with moderate confidence that the first infection was linked to a lab.

Some supporters of the lab-leak hypothesis have theorized that researchers were accidentally exposed because of inadequate safety practices while working with samples from the wild, or perhaps after creating the virus in the laboratory. U.S. intelligence officials have rejected suspicions China developed the virus as a bioweapon.

The continuing search for answers has inflamed tensions between the U.S. and China, which has accused the U.S. of making it the scapegoat for the disaster. Some experts fear the pandemic's origins may never be known.

FROM BATS TO PEOPLE

Scientists said in the Cell paper that SARS-CoV-2, which causes COVID-19, is the ninth documented coronavirus to infect humans. All previous ones originated in animals.

That includes the virus that caused the 2003 SARS epidemic, which also has been associated with markets selling live animals in China.

Many researchers believe wild animals were intermediate hosts for SARS-CoV-2, meaning they were infected with a bat coronavirus that then evolved. Scientists have been looking for the exact bat coronavirus involved, and in September identified three viruses in bats in Laos more similar to SARS-CoV-2 than any known viruses.

Worobey suspects raccoon dogs were the intermediate host. The fox-like mammals are susceptible to coronaviruses and were being sold live at the Huanan market, he said.

"The gold-standard piece of evidence for an animal origin" would be an infected animal from there, Goldstein said. "But as far as we know, the market was cleared out."

Earlier this year, a joint report by the World Health Organization and China called the transmission of the virus from bats to humans through another animal the most likely scenario and a lab leak "extremely unlikely."

But that report also sowed doubt by pegging the first known COVID-19 case as an accountant who had no connection to the Huanan market and first showed symptoms on Dec. 8, 2019. Worobey said proponents of the lab-leak theory point to that case in claiming the virus escaped from a Wuhan Institute of Virology facility near where the man lived.

According to Worobey's research, however, the man said in an interview that his Dec. 8 illness was actually a dental problem, and his COVID-19 symptoms began on Dec. 16, a date confirmed in hospital records.

Worobey's analysis identifies an earlier case: a vendor in the Huanan market who came down with COVID-19 on Dec. 11.

ANIMAL THREATS

Experts worry the same sort of animal-to-human transmission of viruses could spark new pandemics — and worsen this one.

Since COVID-19 emerged, many types of animals have gotten infected, including pet cats, dogs and ferrets; zoo animals such as big cats, otters and non-human primates; farm-raised mink; and white-tailed deer.

Most got the virus from people, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which says that humans can spread it to animals during close contact but that the risk of animals transmitting it to people is low.

Another fear, however, is that animals could unleash new viral variants. Some wonder if the omicron variant began this way.

"Around the world, we might have animals potentially incubating these variants even if we get (COVID-19)

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under control in humans," said David O'Connor, a virology expert at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. "We're probably not going to do a big giraffe immunization program any time soon."

Worobey said he has been looking for genetic fingerprints that might indicate whether omicron was created when the virus jumped from humans to an animal, mutated, and then leaped back to people.

Experts say preventing zoonotic disease will require not only cracking down on illegal wildlife sales but making progress on big global problems that increase risky human-animal contact, such as habitat destruction and climate change.

Failing to fully investigate the animal origin of the virus, scientists said in the Cell paper, "would leave the world vulnerable to future pandemics arising from the same human activities that have repeatedly put us on a collision course with novel viruses."

'TOXIC' POLITICS

But further investigation is stymied by superpower politics. Lawrence Gostin of Georgetown University said there has been a "bare-knuckles fight" between China and the United States.

"The politics around the origins investigation has literally poisoned the well of global cooperation," said Gostin, director of the WHO Collaborating Center on National and Global Health Law. "The politics have literally been toxic."

An AP investigation last year found that the Chinese government was strictly controlling all research into COVID-19's origins and promoting fringe theories that the virus could have come from outside the country.

"This is a country that's by instinct very closed, and it was never going to allow unfettered access by foreigners into its territory," Gostin said.

Still, Gostin said there's one positive development that has come out of the investigation.

WHO has formed an advisory group to look into the pandemic's origins. And Gostin said that while he doubts the panel will solve the mystery, "they will have a group of highly qualified scientists ready to be deployed in an instant in the next pandemic."

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Court rejects Trump's efforts to keep records from 1/6 panel

By ERIC TUCKER and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A federal appeals court ruled Thursday against an effort by former President Donald Trump to shield documents from the House committee investigating the Jan. 6 insurrection at the Capitol.

In a 68-page ruling, the three-judge panel tossed aside Trump's various arguments for blocking through executive privilege records that the committee regards as vital to its investigation into the run-up to the deadly riot that was aimed at overturning the results of the 2020 presidential election.

Judge Patricia Millett, writing for the court, said Congress had a "uniquely vital interest" in studying the events of Jan. 6 and that President Joe Biden had made a "carefully reasoned" determination that the documents were in the public interest and that executive privilege should therefore not be invoked. Trump also failed to show any harm that would occur from the release of the sought-after records, Millett wrote.

"On the record before us, former President Trump has provided no basis for this court to override President Biden's judgment and the agreement and accommodations worked out between the Political Branches over these documents," the opinion states.

It adds, "Both Branches agree that there is a unique legislative need for these documents and that they are directly relevant to the Committee's inquiry into an attack on the Legislative Branch and its constitutional role in the peaceful transfer of power."

The appeals court ruled that the injunction that has prevented the National Archives from turning over the documents will expire in two weeks, or when the Supreme Court rules on an expected appeal from Trump, whichever is later. Lawyers for Trump can also ask the entire appeals court to review the case. Seven of the 11 appellate judges on the court were appointed by Democratic presidents, four by Repub-

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lican presidents.

The panel's leaders, Reps. Bennie Thompson, D-Miss., and Liz Cheney, R.-Wyo., hailed the ruling, saying it "respects the Select Committee's interest in obtaining White House records and the President's judgment in allowing those records to be produced. Our work moves ahead swiftly. We will get to the truth."

But Trump's spokeswoman said the matter was far from settled.

"Regardless of today's decision by the the appeals court, this case was always destined for the Supreme Court," Liz Harrington said. "President Trump's duty to defend the Constitution and the Office of the Presidency continues, and he will keep fighting for every American and every future Administration."

In its ruling, the court said the executive privilege being asserted by Trump is not a personal privilege but instead one that he "stewards" for the "benefit of the Republic."

"The interests the privilege protects are those of the Presidency itself, not former President Trump individually. And the President has determined that immediate disclosure will promote, not injure, the national interest, and that delay here is itself injurious," the opinion states.

Biden had the committee defer its requests for some of the early documents that might have posed privilege claims, and officials expect more documents in subsequent tranches will be subject to the same outcome.

The court praised Biden's "calibrated judgement" in working with Congress and the Archives to weigh privilege concerns, saying it "bears no resemblance to the 'broad and limitless waiver' of executive privilege former President Trump decries."

White House spokesman Mike Gwin said, "As President Biden determined, the constitutional protections of executive privilege should not be used to shield information that reflects a clear and apparent effort to subvert the Constitution itself."

Trump sued the House Jan. 6 committee and the National Archives to stop the White House from allowing the release of documents related to the insurrection. Biden had waived Trump's executive privilege claims as the current officeholder.

At issue, the court said, is not that Trump "has no say in the matter" but rather his failure to show that withholding the documents should supersede Biden's "considered and weighty judgment" that Congress is entitled to the records.

The National Archives has said that the records Trump wants to block include presidential diaries, visitor logs, speech drafts, handwritten notes "concerning the events of January 6" from the files of former chief of staff Mark Meadows, and "a draft Executive Order on the topic of election integrity."

Arguing for the committee, U.S. House lawyer Douglas Letter argued that the determination of a current president should outweigh predecessors in almost all circumstances and noted that both Biden and Congress were in agreement that the Jan. 6 records should be turned over.

All three of the appeals court judges who heard the arguments were nominated by Democrats. Millett and Judge Robert Wilkins were nominated by former President Barack Obama. Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson is a Biden appointee seen as a contender for a Supreme Court seat should one open during the current administration.

Republican presidents nominated six of the nine Supreme Court justices, including three chosen by Trump.

Associated Press writers Jill Colvin and Mary Clare Jalonick contributed to this report.

Jurors at Potter trial see Daunte Wright shooting aftermath

By AMY FORLITI and STEVE KARNOWSKI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Prosecutors at a former Minnesota police officer's trial in the shooting of Daunte Wright played extensive video of the aftermath, showing jurors images of officers pulling him from his car and attempting lifesaving measures.

Thursday's testimony at Kim Potter's manslaughter trial began with tearful testimony from Wright's passenger and girlfriend, recounting her screams and how Wright "was just gasping" after he was shot.

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A stream of police officers and emergency medical workers followed her to the stand for much of the day, eventually prompting Potter attorney Paul Engh to seek a mistrial on the grounds that the state was presenting evidence irrelevant to her guilt or innocence, and instead was showing evidence consisting of "sordid pictures and prejudicial impact."

A pool report described jurors' reactions to body-camera footage showing officers working on Wright, with one juror looking away and shaking her head and another with his hand over his mouth as he watched.

Prosecutor Matthew Frank pointed out that the state is seeking an aggravated sentence for Potter if she's convicted, and to do so must show the wider impact of her actions. Judge Regina Chu quickly dismissed the motion, though she did tell prosecutors to avoid showing the jury duplicate autopsy pictures.

Potter, 49, is charged with manslaughter in the April 11 shooting of Wright, who had been pulled over in the Minneapolis suburb of Brooklyn Center for expired license tags and an air freshener hanging from his mirror. Potter, who quit the force two days after his death, has said she meant to use her Taser on Wright.

Potter is white. Wright, 20, was Black. The shooting set off days of protests and clashes with law enforcement in Brooklyn Center, just as former Minneapolis Police Officer Derek Chauvin was on trial nearby in George Floyd's death.

Wright's passenger was the first witness Thursday. Alayna Albrecht-Payton, who said she had begun a relationship with Wright just a few weeks before he died, described her panic when he was shot.

"I grabbed, like, whatever was in the car. I don't remember if it was a sweater or a towel or a blanket or something ... and put it on his chest like, like you know, you see in movies and TV shows," she said. "I didn't know what to do."

Albrecht-Payton also apologized to Katie Bryant, Wright's mother, who had called his phone trying to re-establish contact after a call with him was cut off right before he was shot. Bryant testified tearfully a day earlier that she first saw her son's apparently lifeless body via that video call.

"I pointed the camera on him," Albrecht-Payton said. "And I'm so sorry I did that."

Body-camera video showed Wright pulling away from officers as they tried to arrest him on an outstanding warrant and getting back in his car. After he was shot, the car moved away down the street, eventually crashing into another vehicle.

The collision was captured by Officer Alan Salvosa's police car dashcam, which was behind the car when Wright's vehicle struck it.

Salvosa's body camera showed him calling for aid as he drew his weapon and repeatedly ordered "Put your hands up!" to the occupants of Wright's car. The passenger — Albrecht-Payton — is heard saying "I can't." Salvosa testified that he couldn't see into the rear of the car, which he knew had just left a location where officers were seeking to make an arrest.

As Salvosa waited for backup and ambulances, about 8 1/2 minutes passed from the moment of the crash before officers moved in to begin trying to help Wright. Testimony and body-camera footage showed that officers weren't sure what they were dealing with and took time to approach the car safely.

Prosecutors also called the wife and the daughter of a man who was in the car struck by Wright's to testify about the toll the crash took on the man's health. Denise Lundgren Wells testified that her father, Kenneth Lundgren, had health issues before the crash but that his decline accelerated afterward. He is now in his 80s and in hospice care, she testified.

Frank, the prosecutor, said the post-shooting evidence is aimed at showing that Potter's actions created a danger to others beyond Wright — something the state will have to prove as it seeks a longer sentence for Potter than is called for under the state's guidelines.

Chu ruled that the state must eliminate duplicate autopsy photos, and that any images of Wright with his eyes open must be blacked out above the nose.

"The jury is not supposed to be deciding this case based upon sympathy, passion or anything of that sort," she said.

The case is being heard by a mostly white jury.

First-degree manslaughter requires prosecutors to prove Potter acted recklessly. Second-degree requires

them to prove culpable negligence. Neither charge requires proof that she intended to kill. State sentencing guidelines call for just over seven years in prison on the first charge and four years on the other.

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

Cold weather US states struggling to hire snowplow drivers

By AMY BETH HANSON Associated Press

HELENA, Mont. (AP) — More U.S. drivers could find themselves stuck on snowy highways or have their travel delayed this winter due to a shortage of snowplow drivers — a reality that could hit home Friday as winter storms start dumping snow from the Intermountain West to the Upper Great Lakes.

States from Washington to Pennsylvania, including Montana and Wyoming in the Rocky Mountains, are having trouble finding enough people willing to take the comparatively low-paying jobs that require a Commercial Driver's License and often entail working at odd hours in dangerous conditions.

"We want the traveling public to understand why it could take longer this season to clear highways during winter storms," said Jon Swartz, the maintenance administrator for the Montana Department of Transportation, which is short about 90 drivers. "Knowing this helps motorists to plan ahead and adjust or even delay travel plans."

The labor shortage and lingering concerns about the pandemic have left employers scrambling to find enough school bus drivers, waiters, cooks and even teachers. The shortage comes as the number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits dropped last week to the lowest level in 52 years and some are seeking a better work-life balance.

Several states are either already feeling the crunch or could be soon: Heavy snow is predicted in the coming days in large swaths of the country, including Utah and Colorado, where more than a foot (30 centimeters) is forecast in higher elevations. Over a half a foot could drop in parts of Nebraska and Iowa. Parts of Nevada and New Mexico also expect winter storms.

State transportation departments say there are several reasons for a lack of snowplow drivers: the record low unemployment rate, an aging workforce and an increased demand for diesel mechanics and CDL drivers in other industries. Private companies can also be more nimble — raising salaries and offering bonuses to drivers — than state agencies, which usually have to get legislative approval to change salaries.

"Everyone's sort of competing for the same group of workers and private companies can often offer higher salaries than the state government," said Barbara LaBoe, spokesperson for Washington state's Department of Transportation.

Along with the competitive market, LaBoe said Washington also lost 151 winter operations workers who did not want to comply with the state's COVID-19 vaccine mandate.

One of the main competitors for states seeking workers with a Commercial Driver's License are private trucking companies that have been raising driver pay, in some cases several times this year, to fill their own shortages and meet the increasing demand to move freight and clear supply chain bottlenecks.

The American Trucking Associations estimates there will be a record shortage of just over 80,000 drivers this year, and that doesn't include the shortfall in drivers for school buses, public transportation or snowplows.

The ATA says the shortage has many roots, including many drivers nearing retirement age, the pandemic causing some to leave the industry and training schools churning out fewer new drivers in 2020. Others may leave the industry because they don't like being away from home while an increase in the number of states legalizing marijuana leads to more drivers being unable to pass a drug test, the ATA says.

Some states are willing to hire snowplow drivers and pay for their CDL training, but it's not likely those hires will be ready to work this winter, officials said.

Some snowplow drivers work year-round in highway maintenance jobs, while seasonal workers are hired to fill the additional shifts in the winter.

The shortage is leading states to make plans to shift mechanics and other full-time employees who have

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Commercial Driver's Licenses into plows, which can cause problems if a plow needs maintenance work and the mechanic is out driving.

Wyoming has priorities for which roads will be plowed first and for how many hours per day plows will operate on each roadway. Interstate 80, the major east-west corridor across the southern part of the state, can be plowed around the clock while plowing stops on other roads, such as Interstates 90 and 25, between midnight at 4 a.m. Those guidelines may come into play more this year, said Luke Reiner, director of Wyoming's Department of Transportation.

In Washington, LaBoe said some roads and mountain passes will be closed longer than usual during and after significant storms and some roads may not receive the same level of service.

Brief or isolated storms won't cause problems in most states, in part because departments can move drivers and equipment around based on the weather forecast.

"If we have a series of storms over several days or if it hits the whole state at once, (the shortage) is going to become more evident because we don't have as deep a bench," LaBoe said.

Washington is still short about 150 seasonal and full-time workers, but things have improved since October when it was short 300 workers.

Even if states are able to hire drivers with commercial licenses, they still have to train them to run a snowplow and load the truck with salt and sand before learning a route.

"When you're plowing the road you need to know where the bridge abutment is and where the expansion joints are so you don't hook that with a plow," LaBoe said.

Pennsylvania is short 270 permanent positions and 560 temporary ones, but the Department of Transportation said that doesn't mean the roads will be treacherous this winter.

"Our goal is to keep roads safe and passable rather than completely free of ice and snow," said Alexis Campbell, spokesperson for the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation. The roads will be cleared once the snow stops, she said.

Ease of travel is important to businesses. Capitol Courier has contracts with deadlines to deliver electronic replacement parts from their warehouse in Helena, Montana, to about 30 businesses around the state as soon as they call.

"The roads are critical to what we do," said Shawn White Wolf, co-manager of Capitol Courier.

Snowplow drivers are devoted to their jobs, understanding their work is critical to the safety of the traveling public and to emergency responders, said Rick Nelson director of the winter maintenance technical service program for the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials.

Still, he understands that convincing newcomers "to be out there in the worst conditions" can be difficult.

Nelson said the shortage means states will be shifting resources when they can and making sure roads are clear during times of peak demand while "you try to recruit, get out there and beat the bushes and convince folks that jumping in a plow in the middle of the night at Christmastime is a good career choice."

Jussie Smollett guilty verdict latest in polarizing case

By DON BABWIN and SARA BURNETT Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — Jussie Smollett's conviction Thursday for lying to police about a racist, homophobic attack came nearly three years after his report of a horrifying hate crime quickly became part of a polarized political landscape, with people — including the president of the United States — weighing in from all over.

A prosecutor said the verdict was "a resounding message by the jury that Mr. Smollett did exactly what we said he did" — recruit two brothers to fake an attack so it could be recorded by a surveillance camera and posted on social media for publicity.

The brothers testified that the former "Empire" actor paid them \$3,500 for the hoax and gave them lines to yell, including about "MAGA country," an apparent reference to then-President Donald Trump's "Make America Great Again" slogan.

The report made headlines around the world and prompted a massive manhunt in Chicago, with roughly two dozen police joining the investigation. It also drew criticism from Trump, who called the police depart-

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ment's handling of the case "an absolute embarrassment to our country."

"Not only did Mr. Smollett lie to the police and wreak havoc here in the city for weeks on end for no reason whatsoever, but then he compounded the problem by lying under oath to a jury," special prosecutor Dan Webb said after Thursday's verdict.

Smollett, who is Black and gay, maintained throughout the nearly three-year legal battle that he was attacked in downtown Chicago in January 2019 by people who yelled racist and anti-gay slurs and put a noose around his neck.

His attorney declared Smollett's innocence again Thursday after the jury found him guilty on five of six counts of disorderly conduct for lying to police. Nenyé Uche said Smollett would appeal the conviction, and is "100% confident" his name will be cleared by an appellate court.

"Unfortunately we were facing an uphill battle where Jussie was already tried and convicted in the media and then we had to somehow get the jury to forget or unsee all the news stories that they had been hearing that were negative for the last three years," Uche told reporters after the verdict.

The jury convicted the 39-year-old on five counts of disorderly conduct — for each separate time he was charged with lying to police in the days after the alleged attack. He was acquitted on a sixth count, of lying to a detective in mid-February, weeks after Smollett said he was attacked.

Smollett stood and faced the jury, showing no visible reaction as the verdict was read. He and his family later left the courthouse without comment.

Judge James Linn set a post-trial hearing for Jan. 27, and said he would schedule Smollett's sentencing at a later date. Disorderly conduct is a class 4 felony that carries a prison sentence of up to three years, but experts have said if convicted, Smollett would likely be placed on probation and ordered to perform community service.

The damage to his personal and professional life may be more severe. Smollett lost his role on the TV program "Empire," which was filmed in Chicago, after prosecutors said the alleged attack was a hoax, and he told jurors earlier this week, "I've lost my livelihood."

The jury deliberated for just over nine hours Wednesday and Thursday after a roughly one-week trial.

Smollett testified that he was the victim of a real hate crime, telling jurors "there was no hoax." He called the brothers who testified against him "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 didn't like "who he was." They also alleged the brothers made up the story about the attack being staged to get money from Smollett, and that they said they wouldn't testify against him if Smollett paid them each \$1 million.

Asked Thursday if Smollett could be charged with perjury for lying on the witness stand, Webb said perjury charges "generally" don't happen after a defendant is convicted, but that it was unclear what would happen in Smollett's case.

He also said the Chicago Police Department was vindicated by the jury's verdict.

"A lot of times people say, 'Well, police officers sweep things under the rug.' This police department responded by absolutely testifying in this trial that they took it seriously," Webb said. "They believed he was a victim of a crime and they worked so hard for the next three weeks."

But Uche said Chicago police should have investigated the case "much more," and that there were some witnesses who were never interviewed.

He called the jury's split verdict "inconsistent," saying it made no sense for Smollett to be convicted of five counts but not the sixth charge, since "everything stems from one incident."

An attorney for Abimbola and Olabingo Osundairo, the brothers who testified against Smollett, said her clients "could not be more thrilled and pleased with the results."

Chicago police "got this one right," Gloria Rodriguez said.

Associated Press reporter Sophia Tareen contributed to this report.

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

53 migrants dead, 54 injured in truck crash in south Mexico

By MANUEL DE LA CRUZ and EDGAR H. CLEMENTE Associated Press

TUXTLA GUTIERREZ, Mexico (AP) — A cargo truck jammed with people who appeared to be Central American migrants rolled over and crashed into a pedestrian bridge over a highway in southern Mexico on Thursday, killing at least 53 people and injuring dozens more, authorities reported.

The federal Attorney General's Office said the preliminary estimate lists 53 dead, with three of the injured in critical condition.

Luis Manuel Moreno, the head of the Chiapas state civil defense office, said about 21 of the injured had serious wounds and were taken to local hospitals.

The crash occurred on a highway leading toward the Chiapas state capital. Photos from the scene showed victims strewn across the pavement and inside the truck's freight compartment.

Video footage showed the dead and injured migrants jumbled into a pile inside the collapsed freight container, with some struggling to extract themselves from the weight of bodies piled atop them.

Later, rescue workers arranged the dead in rows of white sheets, side by side, on the asphalt.

The victims appeared to be immigrants from Central America, though their nationalities had not yet been confirmed. Moreno reported that some of the survivors said they were from the neighboring country of Guatemala.

Sitting on the pavement beside the overturned trailer, survivor Celso Pacheco of Guatemala said the truck felt like it was speeding and then seemed to lose control under the weight of the migrants inside.

Pacheco said there were migrants from Guatemala and Honduras aboard and estimated there were eight to 10 young children. He said he was trying to reach the United States, but now he expected to be deported to Guatemala.

Rescue workers tried to excavate survivors from a pile of humanity in the flipped trailer, separating the injured from the dead. Dazed wounded stumbled among the wreckage.

Marco Antonio Sánchez, director of the Chiapas Firefighter Institute, said ambulances raced victims to three hospitals, carrying three to four injured each. When there weren't enough ambulances they loaded them into pickup trucks, he said.

Guatemalan President Alejandro Giammattei wrote on Twitter: "I deeply regret the tragedy in Chiapas state, and I express my solidarity for the victims' families, to whom we will offer all the necessary consular assistance, including repatriation."

Moreno said that it appeared that speed and the weight of the truck's human cargo may have caused it to tip over, and that as the vehicle toppled over it hit the base of a steel pedestrian bridge. There was a curve in the road near the accident scene that may have contributed to the crash.

That meant at least 107 people were crowded into the vehicle. It is not unusual for freight trucks in Mexico to be carrying so many people in migrant-smuggling operations in southern Mexico.

But rescue workers who first arrived at the scene and who were not authorized to be quoted by name said that even more migrants had been aboard the truck when it crashed and had fled for fear of being detained by immigration agents.

One paramedic said some of those who fled into surrounding neighborhoods were bloodied or bruised, but still limped away in their desperation to escape.

The truck had originally been a closed freight module of the kind used to transport perishable goods. The container was smashed open by the force of the impact. It was unclear if the driver survived.

Those who spoke to survivors said the migrants told of boarding the truck in Mexico, near the border with Guatemala, and of paying between \$2,500 and \$3,500 to be transported to Mexico's central state of Puebla. Once there, they would presumably have contracted with another set of migrant smugglers to take them to the U.S. border.

In recent months, Mexican authorities have tried to block migrants from walking in large groups toward

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the U.S. border, but the clandestine and illicit flow of migrant smuggling has continued.

In October, in one of the largest busts in recent memory, authorities in the northern border state of Tamaulipas found an 652 mainly Central American migrants jammed into a convoy of six freight trucks heading toward the U.S. border.

Irineo Mujica, an activist who is leading a march of a couple of hundred migrants who have been walking for more almost 1 1/2 months across southern Mexico, blamed Mexico's policies of cracking down on migrant caravans for the disaster.

Mujica and his group had almost reached the outskirts of Mexico City on Thursday, after weeks of dealing with National Guard officers who tried to block the march. Mujica said the group would stop Thursday and offer prayers for the dead migrants.

"These policies that kill us, that murder us, is what leads to this type of tragedy," Mujica said.

In fact, they are two very different groups. Caravans generally attract migrants who don't have the thousands of dollars needed to pay migrant smugglers.

Migrants involved in serious accidents are often allowed to stay in Mexico at least temporarily because they are considered witnesses to and victims of a crime, and later Thursday Mexico's National Immigration Institute said it would offer the humanitarian visas to the survivors.

The agency also said the Mexican government would help identify the dead and cover funeral costs or repatriation of their remains.

Mass deaths of migrants are something that President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has been desperate to avoid, even as his administration has accepted requests from the U.S. government to stem the flow of migrants moving north. "It is very painful," he wrote on his Twitter account.

It was one of the worst single-day death tolls for migrants in Mexico since the 2010 massacre of 72 migrants by the Zetas drug cartel in the northern state of Tamaulipas.

QB Bryce Young of Alabama voted AP Player of the Year

By RALPH D. RUSSO AP College Football Writer

Alabama quarterback Bryce Young is The Associated Press college football player of the year, giving the Crimson Tide their second consecutive winner.

Young received 42 of 53 first-place votes from AP Top 25 voters and 137 points to easily finish ahead of Michigan defensive end Aidan Hutchinson (four first-place votes, 67 points) for the AP Player of the Year honor presented by Regions Bank.

Pittsburgh quarterback Kenny Pickett was third; Alabama linebacker Will Anderson Jr. was fourth; and Ohio State quarterback C.J. Stroud was fifth.

Young, Hutchinson, Pickett and Stroud are the finalists for the Heisman Trophy, which will be presented Saturday in New York.

Later Thursday, during the ESPN College Football Awards show, Young also won the Davey O'Brien Award as the nation's top quarterback, and the Maxwell Award as the most outstanding player in college football.

Other winners included Georgia defensive tackle Jordan Davis, who won the Bednarik Award as the nation's top defensive player and the Outland Trophy as the most outstanding interior lineman, and Kenneth Walker III of Michigan State, who became the first Spartans player to win the Doak Walker Award as the nation's best running back.

Walker, who finished sixth in AP player of the year voting, was also named Walter Camp player of the year.

A sophomore and first-year starter, Young passed for 4,322 yards and a school-record tying 43 touchdowns, leading the top-ranked Tide to the Southeastern Conference championship and the No. 1 seed in the College Football Playoff. The Tide will face No. 4 Cincinnati on Dec. 31 at the Cotton Bowl.

Young said he felt well prepared for the challenge of leading a program that has set the standard in college football for more than a decade, but nothing speaks louder than performance.

"Settling in and getting to play in different environments, getting to be put in situations, naturally, makes you more comfortable as leaders," Young told AP. "It's always about what you do in the offseason, how

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you carry yourself, but any time you're able to produce in big moments and you're able to demonstrate a lot, that's always a big part, as well. Because leadership is a lot about action."

Young capped his season with an SEC championship game-record 421 yards passing against Georgia last week.

Alabama receiver DeVonta Smith became the first Alabama player to win AP player of the year in 2020. Young is the 18th quarterback to win the award since it was established in 1998.

Young, a Southern California native and former five-star recruit, said the high expectations are what drew him to Alabama and help motivate him.

"You want to live up to the pressure and to the hype of it all," he said.

Other awards handed out Thursday night:

- Pitt receiver Tre Tipton won the Disney Spirit Award.
- Stanford quarterback Isaiah Sanders won the Wuerffel Trophy for community service.
- Pitt's Jordan Addison won the Biletnikoff Award as the nation's top receiver.
- Michigan's Jake Moody won the Lou Groza Award as the nation's best kicker.
- San Diego State's Matt Araiza took the Ray Guy Award as the best punter.
- Cincinnati cornerback Coby Bryant won the Thorpe Award as the best defensive back.

Before Thursday:

- Georgia's Nakobe Dean won the Butkus Award as the nation's top linebacker.
- Colorado State's Trey McBride won the Mackey Award for best tight end.
- Iowa's Tyler Linderbaum won the Rimington Award as the best center.
- Arkansas linebacker Grant Morgan won the Burlsworth Trophy as the top player whose career started as a walk-on.
- Hutchinson won the Lombardi Award as the best lineman.
- Anderson won the Nagurski defensive player of the year award.

AP Player of the Year voting:

- Bryce Young, QB, Alabama — 137 points (42 first-place votes).
- Aidan Hutchinson, DE, Michigan — 67 (4).
- Kenny Pickett, QB, Pitt — 41 (2).
- Will Anderson Jr., LB, Alabama — 32 (4).
- C.J. Stroud, QB, Ohio State — 17 (1).
- Kenneth Walker III, RB, Michigan State — 13.
- Jordan Davis, DT, Georgia — 8.
- Matt Corral, QB, Mississippi — 2.
- Jerome Ford, RB, Cincinnati — 1.

More AP college football: <https://apnews.com/hub/college-football> and https://twitter.com/AP_Top25 Sign up for the AP's college football newsletter: <https://apnews.com/cfbtop25>

COVID-19 reunion: Tearful patients, nurses share memories

By AMY TAXIN Associated Press

MISSION VIEJO, Calif. (AP) — Brian Patnoe never saw the faces of the masked health care workers who nursed him back to health from the coronavirus that nearly killed him. But he knew each by their eyes, which peered out through layers of protective gear as he lay in their hospital's COVID-19 unit.

He was reunited Thursday with some of those who treated him for weeks after he arrived at Providence Mission Hospital in March 2020, just as the virus was descending on California. They still wore masks and he still recognized them.

"It's amazing how I saw all the eyes and I was like, 'I know you, I know you, I know you,'" the 62-year-old Patnoe said, his own eyes welling with tears while embracing each of a half-dozen nurses who lined

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up to greet him outside the hospital in Southern California's Mission Viejo. "Oh, my God, thank you guys for keeping me alive."

Patnoe and other coronavirus survivors held an emotional reunion with the nurses, respiratory therapists and doctors who saved their lives at a time when little was known about the virus. They shared hugs, memories and photos at an event marking the hospital's 50th anniversary and added items to a time capsule created so future generations will remember the pandemic. It's to be opened in 2071.

It also was a reunion for the staff that volunteered to work in the hospital's first coronavirus unit. Many have moved on to other jobs.

The unit members dubbed themselves the "Tip of the Spear" for taking on the virus in the early days of the pandemic when they didn't know if they had adequate protective gear or exactly what would save their patients. Many later tattooed spears onto their wrists, with a heart.

"We all felt like we had all bonded. We had all volunteered," nurse Christina Anderson said.

When the pandemic arrived, protective gear was in frightfully short supply, and so was toilet paper. Dr. Robert Goldberg, a pulmonary and critical care specialist, recalled how doctors had to wait weeks to get COVID-19 test results confirmed for their patients.

"We really didn't know what we were facing," he said.

California was the first state in the nation to issue a shutdown order in 2020 and fared relatively well in the early months. But by the end of the year, the state was the U.S. epicenter for the virus and many hospitals were overwhelmed.

While the outlook has improved vastly with vaccinations, the virus remains a threat. Deaths in the state are lower on a per-capita basis than most others but hundreds still die weekly and the average daily number of cases has climbed nearly 70% in the past two weeks, according to data compiled by Johns Hopkins University.

The time capsule created at the hospital about 45 miles (72 kilometers) southeast of Los Angeles aims to create a memory for future generations of what happened there during the pandemic. Items collected include a cloth face mask, a fire department patch, a copy of a sign telling people to "mask up to open up" and "we can do this," and letters and photos from patients.

Patricia Gomez, 32, submitted photos taken of her and the nurse who delivered her baby in July 2020, when she was ravaged by COVID-19. Her newborn son was able to leave the hospital quickly and tested negative for the virus, but she had to stay another week because she was so ill.

"I was scared that I wasn't going to make it," she said. "But I was so grateful. The nurses were always caring. I never felt alone."

Patnoe, who was out of work for six months, recalled vivid dreams during his two stints on a ventilator. In one, his late mother, who was a nurse, came over to him and said he wasn't ready to "come here" yet.

In the time capsule, he included a copy of a photo snapped when he was finally released from the hospital. That day, he said, nurses and doctors lined up and clapped as he was wheeled down the hall and outside to finally see his family. It was a far cry from how the halls emptied out when he was brought in as one of the hospital's first COVID-19 patients.

"I'm so lucky to be alive," he said. "I think we've become a little desensitized to it just right now, because it's become such a common thing."

Since Patnoe left, the hospital has seen hundreds of coronavirus patients. In the COVID-19 intensive care unit, staff kept a tally of survivors and logged the initials of those who didn't make it, Goldberg said.

After last year's winter spike, hospitalizations plummeted and the hospital shut down the unit, he said.

It's now back up and running, Goldberg said, with the community heading into winter and coronavirus cases rising again.

Girlfriend: Daunte Wright was 'just gasping' after shooting

By AMY FORLITI and STEVE KARNOWSKI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — The woman who was riding with Daunte Wright when he was pulled over by police tearfully testified on Thursday about the chaos right after an officer shot him, saying she screamed

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at Wright trying to get a response but that he "wasn't answering me and he was just gasping."

"I grabbed, like, whatever was in the car. I don't remember if it was a sweater or a towel or a blanket or something ... and put it on his chest like, like you know, you see in movies and TV shows," Alayna Albrecht-Payton, who was Wright's girlfriend, testified. "I didn't know what to do."

Albrecht-Payton answered Wright's cellphone as his mother tried frantically to reestablish contact after a call with him was cut off right before he was shot. Wright's mother, Katie Bryant, testified tearfully on Wednesday that she first saw her son's apparently lifeless body via that video call.

"I pointed the camera on him," Albrecht-Payton said. "And I'm so sorry I did that."

Kim Potter, 49, is charged with first-degree and second-degree manslaughter in Wright's April 11 death in Brooklyn Center. The white former officer — she resigned two days after the shooting — has said she meant to use her Taser on the 20-year-old Wright, who was Black, after he attempted to drive away from a traffic stop as officers tried to arrest him, but that she grabbed her handgun instead.

Albrecht-Payton, 20, took the stand on the second day of testimony, after opening statements Wednesday in which prosecutors portrayed Potter as a veteran cop who had been repeatedly trained in Taser use, with warnings about avoiding such deadly mix-ups.

The defense countered that Potter had simply made an error. Attorney Paul Engh also said Wright might have averted tragedy if he had surrendered to Potter and the other officers at the scene.

Defense attorney Earl Gray pressed Albrecht-Payton on Wright's actions immediately after Potter shot him, in an apparent attempt to show that Wright deliberately tried to drive away even while gravely wounded.

Albrecht-Payton said Wright's hands "were never on the wheel" and that the car moved away from the scene because his foot was on the gas.

Gray also questioned Albrecht-Payton about the couple's activities before the traffic stop. She testified that they had smoked marijuana that day.

The jury was shown police videos that showed the scene after Wright's vehicle slammed into another car. The collision was captured by the dashcam of Officer Alan Salvosa's police car, which was behind the car when Wright's vehicle struck it.

Salvosa's body camera showed him calling for aid as he drew his weapon and repeatedly ordered "Put your hands up!" to the occupants of Wright's car. The passenger — Albrecht-Payton — is heard saying "I can't." Salvosa testified that he couldn't see into the rear of the car, which he knew had just left a location where officers were seeking to make an arrest.

As Salvosa waited for backup and ambulances, about 8 1/2 minutes passed from the moment of the crash before officers moved in to begin trying to help Wright. Testimony showed that officers weren't sure what they were dealing with and took time to approach the car safely. Salvosa's body camera footage shows that officers at the scene of the crash did not immediately know that Wright had been shot.

In her opening statement, prosecutor Erin Eldridge told the jury that after Potter shot Wright, she didn't try to render aid and didn't immediately call in the shooting. She said this meant that officers approaching his crashed vehicle "didn't know what they were dealing with" and waited for almost 10 minutes before they "dragged Daunte Wright's dead body out of the car."

Brooklyn Center Officer Anthony Luckey testified that he reported seconds after the shooting that shots had been fired.

Judge Regina Chu on Thursday denied a mistrial motion from Potter's attorneys, who argued that prosecutors were spending too much time presenting prejudicial evidence such as photos of Wright's body.

"I didn't see any evidence directed towards the proof of guilt today, but rather evidence of sordid pictures and prejudicial impact that had little relevance," Engh said.

Prosecutor Matt Frank said the evidence presented showed that Potter's actions created a danger to others, which is something the state will have to prove as it seeks a longer sentence for Potter than is called for under the state's guidelines. He also said the medical testimony addresses the cause of Wright's death.

Chu also said that she ruled in chambers that the state must eliminate duplicate autopsy photos. She said that any images of Wright with his eyes open must be blacked out above the nose.

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"The jury is not supposed to be deciding this case based upon sympathy, passion, or anything of that sort," she said.

Prosecutors on Thursday also called the wife and the daughter of a man who was in the car struck by Wright's to testify about the toll the crash took on the man's health. Denise Lundgren Wells testified that her father, Kenneth Lundgren, had health issues before the crash but that his decline accelerated afterward. He is now in his 80s and in hospice care, she testified.

Video dominated the first day of testimony, with officers' body cameras and a different police dashcam 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 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.

First-degree manslaughter requires prosecutors to prove Potter acted recklessly. Second-degree requires them to prove culpable negligence. Neither charge requires proof that she intended to kill. State sentencing guidelines call for just over seven years in prison on the first charge and four years on the other.

This story was corrected to delete a reference to Albrecht-Payton saying she and Wright smoked marijuana at 10 a.m. on the day of shooting. She said they smoked that day but didn't specify when. Her quote beginning "I grabbed..." was also corrected to include the words "like," "or a blanket" and "like you know."

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

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 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

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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, shoreline 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."

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.

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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 selectively bred hybrid corals — where the eggs of one species are fertilized by the sperm of another — 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."

This story has been corrected to show that van Oppen's team has planted hybrid corals — not corals with modified symbiotic algae — on the Great Barrier Reef.

Follow Caleb Jones on Twitter: @CalebAP

In a first, Starbucks workers agree to union in Buffalo, NY

By DEE-ANN DURBIN and CAROLYN THOMPSON Associated Press

BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP) — Starbucks workers at a store in Buffalo, New York, voted to unionize on Thursday, a first for the 50-year-old coffee retailer in the U.S. and the latest sign that the labor movement is stirring after decades of decline.

The National Labor Relations Board said Thursday that workers voted 19-8 in favor of a union at the Elmwood Avenue location, one of three stores in Buffalo where elections were being held. A second store rejected the union in a vote of 12-8, but the union said it might challenge that result because it wasn't confident all of the eligible votes had been counted. The results of a third store could not be determined because both sides challenged seven separate votes.

Starbucks and Workers United, the union vying to represent the workers, have five business days to submit their objections to the election results, the labor board said. If objections are filed, there could be a series of hearings and appeals that delay certification of the votes. If no objections are filed, the results could be certified as early as Dec. 16.

If the labor board certifies the results and one or more of the stores unionizes, they would be the first Starbucks-owned stores in the U.S. to be represented by a union. The company has actively fought unionization at its stores for decades, saying its stores function best when it works directly with employees.

The election comes at a time of heightened labor unrest in the U.S. Striking cereal workers at Kellogg Co. rejected a new contract offer earlier this week. Thousands of workers were on strike at Deere & Co. earlier this fall. And the U.S. labor board recently approved a redo of a union vote at an Amazon warehouse in Alabama after finding the company pressured workers to vote against the union.

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Labor shortages are giving workers a rare upper hand in wage negotiations. And Dan Graff, director of the Higgins Labor Program at the University of Notre Dame, said the pandemic gave many workers the time and space to rethink what they want from their jobs.

Starbucks workers watching the vote count on Thursday over Zoom on a big screen at a union office in Buffalo erupted into cheers and chants of "Elmwood, Elmwood, Elmwood!" when the results of that location were announced, jumping up and down and hugging each other.

"It has been an unbelievably long road to get to this point," said Michelle Eisen, an 11-year employee at the Elmwood store. "As of today, we have done it, in spite of everything the company has thrown at us."

Starbucks spokesman Reggie Borges said the company hasn't yet determined its next steps, but noted that there were close votes at two of the Buffalo stores.

"Every partner matters. It's how we built the company and how we will continue to run the company," Borges said. "We will continue to focus on the best Starbucks experience we can deliver for every partner and our customers."

Workers at all three stores began voting by mail last month on whether they wanted to be represented by Workers United, an affiliate of the Service Employees International Union.

The NLRB began counting ballots Thursday from union elections held at the stores. Around 111 Starbucks workers were eligible to vote; 78 ballots — including those that were challenged by the union and Starbucks — were counted Thursday.

"Yes" votes could accelerate unionization efforts at other U.S. Starbucks stores. Already, three more stores in Buffalo and a store in Mesa, Arizona, have filed petitions with the labor board for their own union elections. Those cases are pending.

Kent Wong, the director of the UCLA Labor Center, says that it's a big deal for even one Starbucks location to vote for a union, calling it "a symbolic victory for the labor movement."

Wong noted that it could not only galvanize workers at other Starbucks locations but also at fast food chains.

"People are looking at what is happening in Buffalo," Wong said.

But Matthew Dimick, an associate professor of law at the University of Buffalo, noted that Buffalo has a long tradition of labor organizing from its industrial past.

"Most Buffalonians probably see unions as a positive, and are therefore more willing to join and form unions than in other parts of the country," Dimick said.

Rossann Williams, Starbucks executive vice president and president of North America, told The Associated Press that the Buffalo area also had acute problems coming out of the pandemic, including staff shortages and equipment problems.

"We didn't have the right support here on the ground," Williams said. The company has hired more than 200 people in Buffalo over the past few months and turned one store into a training center to bring workers up to speed more quickly, she added.

Union backers at the three Buffalo stores that held elections say Starbucks had chronic problems like understaffing and faulty equipment even before the pandemic. They want more input on pay and store operations.

Starbucks insists its more than 8,000 company-owned U.S. stores function best when it works directly with its employees, which it calls "partners." Many employees in the Buffalo area work at more than one store depending on demand, Starbucks says, and it wants to have the flexibility to move them between stores.

Starbucks asked the labor board to hold one vote with all 20 of its Buffalo-area stores, but the board rejected that request, saying store-by-store votes were appropriate under labor law.

In a letter to Starbucks' U.S. employees this week, Starbucks President and CEO Kevin Johnson reminded them of the company's generous benefits, including paid parental and sick leave and free college tuition through Arizona State University. Late last month, the company also announced pay increases, saying all its U.S. workers will earn at least \$15 — and up to \$23 — per hour by next summer.

But backers of the union say Starbucks can do more.

"If Starbucks can find the money to pay their CEO nearly \$15 million in compensation, I think maybe

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they can afford to pay their workers a decent wage with decent benefits," said U.S. Sen. Bernie Sanders, a Vermont independent, in a recent Twitter post. Sanders held a virtual town hall with Buffalo Starbucks workers earlier this week.

Johnson earned \$14.7 million in salary and stock awards in the company's 2020 fiscal year.

If the votes do get certified and a store opts to unionize, Starbucks is legally obligated to begin the process of collective bargaining with Workers United, said Cathy Creighton, the director of Cornell University's Industrial and Labor Relations Buffalo Co-Lab.

In some cases, companies have closed a location rather than deal with a union. But that's difficult for a retailer like Starbucks, since it would be illegal to close one store and then open another nearby, Creighton said.

Creighton called the union victory at the Elmwood store an "incredibly momentous occasion for working people in America." She noted that it has been almost impossible to organize the food and beverage industry because the employers depend on a low wage workforce that turns over frequently.

"To get a group of people to stay together and weather the campaign that Starbucks waged against them is pretty extraordinary," she added.

Starbucks has shown a willingness to bargain outside the U.S. In Victoria, Canada, workers at a Starbucks store voted to unionize in August 2020. It took Starbucks and the United Steelworkers union nearly a year to reach a collective bargaining agreement, which was ratified by workers in July.

In the U.S., there are around 4,000 Starbucks outlets in grocery stores, airports, casinos and other locations that are unionized. But they are licensed by Starbucks and owned and operated by separate companies.

Thompson reported from Buffalo, New York, and Durbin reported from Detroit, Michigan. AP Business Writer Anne D'Innocenzio contributed from New York.

School district faces two \$100M suits after Oxford shootings

By COREY WILLIAMS and MIKE HOUSEHOLDER Associated Press

SOUTHFIELD, Mich. (AP) — The parents of a 17-year-old girl who was shot in the neck at Oxford High School during a mass shooting that left four students dead filed a pair of lawsuits seeking \$100 million each against a Michigan school district, saying Thursday that the violence could have been prevented.

The lawsuits were filed in federal court in Detroit and Oakland County Circuit Court by Jeffrey and Brandi Franz on behalf of their daughters, Riley, a senior who was wounded Nov. 30, and her sister Bella, a 14-year-old ninth grader who was next to her at the time she was shot, attorney Geoffrey Fieger said.

The parents attended a news conference Thursday with Fieger in his Southfield offices. Jeffrey Franz appeared stoic, staring ahead as the personal injury lawyer accused school officials and staff at Oxford High of not doing enough to prevent the shooting and protect students.

Brandi Franz sat, often with head bowed. The parents did not address reporters.

The lawsuits are the first known civil suits filed in connection with the shooting. Named in the suits are the Oxford school district, Superintendent Tim Throne, Oxford High School principal Steven Wolf, two counselors, two teachers and a staff member.

The Associated Press sent an email Thursday seeking comment from the district.

Ten students and a teacher were shot at the school in Oxford Township, roughly 30 miles (50 kilometers) north of Detroit.

Ethan Crumbley, a 15-year-old sophomore at the school, was arrested at the school and has been charged as an adult with murder, terrorism and other crimes. His parents, James and Jennifer Crumbley, later were charged with involuntary manslaughter and arrested.

Personal-injury lawyers have expressed doubt that the school district could be successfully sued for letting Crumbley stay in school. That's because Michigan law sets a high bar to wring liability out of public schools and other arms of government.

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"You have to show that the administration or faculty members were grossly negligent, meaning they had a reckless disregard for whether an injury was likely to take place," said attorney A. Vince Colella.

Fieger acknowledged Thursday that state law makes it difficult to successfully sue public bodies like school districts. He said a federal lawsuit allows him to subpoena the school district for records and evidence connected to Crumbley and the shooting.

"I understand that this is not going to be easy," Fieger said. "However, now is the time to do something about it."

The gun used in the shooting was bought days before by James Crumbley and their son had full access to it, prosecutors said.

The morning before the shooting school officials met with Ethan Crumbley and his parents after the school after a teacher found a drawing of a gun, a bullet and a person who appeared to have been shot, along with messages stating "My life is useless" and "The world is dead."

The Crumbleys "flatly refused" to take their son home, Throne has said.

The Franz family lives in Leonard, just northwest of Oxford. One of the lawsuits criticized school officials for not expelling, disciplining or searching Crumbley prior to the shooting which allowed Crumbley to return to his classroom "and carry out his murderous rampage."

The lawsuit alleges civil rights violations under the 14th Amendment and also said the school district "knew or should have known that the policies, procedures, training supervision and discipline" staff members named in the suit "were inadequate for the tasks that each defendant was required to perform."

"There's a responsibility that our society shares in protecting our children," Fieger said. "There is a responsibility among teachers, counselors and school administrators who could easily have prevented and stopped this slaughter."

Riley Franz was hospitalized following the shooting. She now is recovering at home, Fieger said.

A 17-year-old student — the remaining victim hospitalized from the shooting — was removed Thursday from an intensive care unit, the Oakland County sheriff's office said.

She was moved to a standard room and was expected to remain in a hospital for the next four to six weeks while undergoing rehabilitation.

On Wednesday, a statement posted on the district's website by Throne said that after all the facts have been obtained and released through the course of the prosecution, he will recommend to the Oxford Board of Education that the district initiate a review of its entire system "as other communities have done when facing similar experiences."

"Our goal with all of this is to bring together all of the facts of what happened before, during and after this horrific incident," he wrote. "We are committed to doing this in a way that allows our community to move forward and does not re-traumatize our community members, who are reeling and suffering from this horrible event."

The criminal cases against Ethan Crumbley and his parents are being overseen by the Oakland County prosecutor's office, and Michigan's attorney general said Tuesday her office will review events that occurred before the mass shooting, despite the district's rejection of her offer to be its third-party investigator.

The district's lawyer told the attorney general's office Monday it was fully cooperating with local law enforcement.

Williams reported from West Bloomfield, Michigan. Associated Press reporter David Eggert in Lansing, Michigan, contributed to this report.

For more of the AP's coverage of the Michigan school shooting: <https://apnews.com/hub/oxford-high-school-shooting>

Biden calls on leaders to end 'backward slide' of democracy

By AAMER MADHANI and COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

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WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden expressed alarm at a “backward slide” of democracy around the globe on Thursday, calling on fellow world leaders to work with him to bolster democratic institutions as his administration grows increasingly concerned about China’s and Russia’s push for global influence.

Biden’s comments to more than 100 leaders at the White House’s first virtual Summit for Democracy came as they pointed to a host of challenges confronting democracies, including corruption, inequality, and limitations on press freedom. The leaders also expressed increasing worry about the perils of disinformation and strengthening autocracies.

“Will we allow the backward slide of rights and democracy to continue unchecked?” Biden asked. “Or will we together -- together -- have a vision ... and courage to once more lead the march of human progress and human freedom forward?”

He didn’t mention either China or Russia by name. But he has repeatedly made a case that the U.S. and like-minded allies need to show the world that democracies are a far better vehicle for societies than autocracies. It is a central tenet of Biden’s foreign policy outlook — one that he vowed would be more outward looking than his predecessor Trump’s “America First” approach.

Biden underscored that even long-established democracies, like the United States, haven’t been immune to the strains, and he called the moment an “inflection point in history.”

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.

“Here in the United States we know as well as anyone that renewing our democracy and strengthening our democratic institutions requires constant effort,” Biden said.

Beyond rhetoric, the president announced he was launching an initiative to spend up to \$424 million for programming around the world that supports independent media, anti-corruption work and more.

Thursday’s video gathering drew backlash from the United States’ chief adversaries and other nations that were not invited.

The ambassadors to the U.S. from China and Russia wrote a joint essay describing the Biden administration as exhibiting a “Cold-War mentality” that will “stoke up ideological confrontation and a rift in the world.” The administration also faced scrutiny over how it went about deciding which countries to invite. China and Russia were among those that did not receive invitations.

Other leaders at the summit delivered their own remarks on the state of democracy — many prerecorded — often reflecting on the stress that rapidly evolving technology is having on their nations. They also bemoaned the increase of disinformation campaigns aimed at undermining institutions and elections.

“The democratic conversation is changing,” said Denmark’s Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen. “New technologies and large tech companies are increasingly setting the stage for the democratic dialogue, sometimes with more emphasis on reach than on freedom of speech.”

The summit comes as Biden is pressing Russia’s Vladimir Putin to step back after a massive buildup of troops on the Ukraine border that has created growing concern in Washington and European capitals as well as Ukraine itself. Biden on Wednesday said that he warned Putin of “severe consequences” if Russia invaded.

Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who took part in Thursday’s summit and later spoke by phone with Biden, said on Twitter, “Democracy is not a given, it must be fought for.”

Poland’s Andrzej Duda spoke out against Russia in his address, decrying Moscow and its support of Belarus.

Poland and Western allies have accused Russian ally Belarus of using migrants as pawns to destabilize the European Union in retaliation for its sanctions on his authoritarian regime. Hundreds of migrants, mostly from the Middle East, have flocked to the Belarus-Poland border.

Poland “took on a commitment to be a support for democracy in Eastern Europe,” Duda said. “It is a beautiful task, but it has its consequences. It has made us the target of the Kremlin propaganda.”

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Putin made no public comment on the summit Thursday as he took part in his own video call with members of the Kremlin council for human rights.

Biden has said passage of his ambitious domestic agenda at home — 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 more on shoring up democracy at home. One early test came Thursday as the House approved 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 — largely backed by Democrats. All three are expected to be stalled by Republicans in the Senate.

“Here in the United States, we know that our democracy is not immune from threats,” Vice President Kamala Harris said in remarks to close out the first day of the summit. “Jan. 6 looms large in our collective conscience, and the anti-voter laws that many states have passed are part of an intentional effort to exclude Americans from participating in our democracy.”

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 along with India and Brazil.

Chinese officials have offered a stream of public criticism about the summit. They have also expressed outrage over the administration inviting Taiwan to take part. China claims the self-governing island as part of its territory and objects to it having contacts on its own with foreign governments.

Pakistan’s Prime Minister Imran Khan declined to attend the conference. In a statement issued ahead of the meeting, the foreign ministry said, “We value our partnership with the U.S., which we wish to expand both bilaterally as well as in terms of regional and international cooperation.”

Yet Pakistan’s relationship with the U.S. has been fraught with suspicion on both sides. Islamabad has balked at Washington’s often-stated criticism that Pakistan has not been a reliable partner in the war on terror, accusing it of harboring the Taliban even as that group fought a U.S.-led coalition. Pakistan says it has lost 70,000 people to the war on terror since 2001 and is ready to be a partner in peace but not in war.

Other uninvited countries have shown their displeasure. Hungary, the only European Union member not invited, tried unsuccessfully to block the EU Commission’s president from speaking on behalf of the bloc at the summit. Last year, Biden referred to Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán as a “thug.”

Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó dismissed the summit as a “domestic political-type of event” where countries whose leaders had a good relationship with Trump were not invited.

Associated Press writers Lisa Mascaro in Washington, Justin Spike in Budapest, Munir Ahmed in Islamabad, Vladimir Isachenkov in Moscow and video producer Liu Zheng in Beijing contributed to this report.

Travis Scott says he was unaware of deaths until after show

The Associated Press undefined

HOUSTON (AP) — Rapper Travis Scott said in an interview that he didn’t know that fans had died at his Astroworld festival in Houston until after his performance.

In a lengthy interview with TV and radio personality Charlamagne Tha God posted on YouTube on Thursday, Scott described from his perspective what happened at the Nov. 5 festival that left 10 people dead.

“It wasn’t really until minutes before the press conference until I figured out exactly what happened. Even after the show, you’re just kind of hearing things, but I didn’t know the exact details until minutes before the press conference,” Scott said.

He said he paused the performance a couple of times, but he couldn’t hear fans screaming for help.

“I stopped like a couple of times just to make sure everybody was OK,” said Scott. “I just really go off the fans energy as a collective, you know? Call and response. I just didn’t, I just didn’t hear that.”

Scott was the headliner and creator of the Astroworld festival, where 50,000 people were in the audi-

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ence. Scott's set turned deadly as fans surged toward the stage. The youngest victim was 9-year-old Ezra Blount. The others who died ranged in age from 14 to 27. Some 300 people were injured and treated at the festival site and 25 were taken to hospitals.

More than 300 lawsuits have been filed so far in Houston and will be consolidated and handled by one judge. Scott, concert promoter Live Nation and other companies associated with the event are among those being sued. Additionally, Scott and the event organizers are the focus of a criminal investigation by Houston police. No one has been charged, and no timetable has been set for when the investigation would be completed.

"Travis Scott, his entourage, handlers, promoters, managers, hangers on and everyone else who enable him are the problem," said Tony Buzbee, an attorney representing the family of 21-year-old Axel Acosta Avila who died, in a statement provided to the AP on Thursday. "Everything that Travis Scott has done or said since ten people died and hundreds of others were injured at his concert has been lawyer driven and calculated to shift blame from him to someone else."

In the interview, Scott denied that his history of encouraging fans to rush the stage or push past security contributed to the chaos at Astroworld.

"People didn't just show up there to be harmful," said Scott. "People showed up to have a good time and something unfortunate happened."

Scott said he had private discussions with some of the families of the victims. He also said that he understood why some families declined his offer to pay for funeral expenses.

"I'm always going to be here to want to help them," Scott said of the victims' families. "I gotta continue to show up for that. I just wanted to make sure they knew that I was there for them and continue to be there for them."

Scott said that he wants to know more about what caused the deaths and be a leader in finding ways to prevent similar tragedies from happening at other live events.

"I have a responsibility to figure out what happened here. I have a responsibility to figure out the solution," said Scott.

US expands Pfizer COVID boosters, opens extra dose to age 16

By LAURAN NEERGAARD and MIKE STOBBE Associated Press

U.S. health authorities again expanded the nation's booster campaign Thursday, opening extra doses of Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine to several million 16- and 17-year-olds.

The U.S. and many other nations already were urging adults to get booster shots to pump up immunity that can wane months after vaccination, calls that intensified with the discovery of the worrisome new omicron variant.

On Thursday, the Food and Drug Administration gave emergency authorization for 16- and 17-year-olds to get a third dose of the vaccine made by Pfizer and its partner BioNTech — once they're six months past their last dose. And hours later, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention lifted the last barrier as Dr. Rochelle Walensky, the agency's director, issued a statement strongly encouraging those teens to get their booster as soon as it's time.

Boosters are important considering that protection against infection wanes over time and "we're facing a variant that has the potential to require more immunity to be protected," Walensky told The Associated Press.

About 200 million Americans are fully vaccinated, including about 4.7 million 16- and 17-year-olds, many of whom got their first shots in the spring and would be eligible for a booster.

"Vaccination and getting a booster when eligible, along with other preventive measures like masking and avoiding large crowds and poorly ventilated spaces, remain our most effective methods for fighting COVID-19," Dr. Janet Woodcock, acting FDA commissioner, said in a statement.

The Pfizer vaccine is the only option in the U.S. for anyone younger than 18, either for initial vaccination or for use as a booster. It's not yet clear if or when teens younger than 16 might need a third Pfizer dose. But Walensky said the CDC and FDA would closely watch data on 12- to 15-year-olds because if

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they eventually need boosters, "we again will want to act swiftly."

Vaccinations for children as young as 5 just began last month, using special low-dose Pfizer shots. By this week, about 5 million 5- to 11-year-olds had gotten a first dose.

The extra-contagious delta variant is causing nearly all COVID-19 infections in the U.S., and in much of the world. It's not yet clear how vaccines will hold up against the new and markedly different omicron mutant. But there's strong evidence that boosters offer a jump in protection against delta-caused infections, currently the biggest threat.

"The booster vaccination increases the level of immunity and dramatically improves protection against COVID-19 in all age groups studied so far," BioNTech CEO Ugur Sahin said in a statement.

Complicating the decision to extend boosters to 16- and 17-year-olds is that the Pfizer shot — and a similar vaccine made by Moderna — have been linked to a rare side effect. Called myocarditis, it's a type of heart inflammation seen mostly in younger men and teen boys.

The FDA said rising COVID-19 cases in the U.S. mean the benefits of boosters greatly outweighed the potential risk from the rare side effect, especially as the coronavirus itself can cause more serious heart inflammation.

Health officials in Israel, which already gives boosters to teens, have said the side effect continues to be rare with third doses.

A U.S. study this week offered additional reassurance. Researchers from children's hospitals around the country checked medical records and found the rare side effect usually is mild and people recover quickly. The research was published Monday in the journal *Circulation*.

Associated Press reporter Matthew Perrone contributed to this report.

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

Footprints show some two-legged dinosaurs were agile

By EMMA H. TOBIN Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Not all two-legged dinosaurs were like the lumbering *Tyrannosaurus rex*.

An analysis of dinosaur tracks from 120 million years ago unearthed in Spain adds to growing evidence that these meat-eating prehistoric beasts belonging to the same group as *T.rex* could be highly agile.

The findings, published Thursday in *Scientific Reports*, reveal one of the fastest known sets of fossilized dinosaur footprints.

These tracks join the ranks of other speedy sets found in Utah and Texas, one of which shows dinosaurs running at speeds over 30 mph. The Spanish footprints showed speeds of nearly 28 mph.

To calculate the running speed, scientists measured the length of the footprint and took into account the dinosaur's hip height and stride length — the distance between two consecutive footprints of the same foot.

All of the fastest known sets of prints come from a family of dinosaurs called theropods. These carnivorous dinosaurs stood on two legs and could not fly, like the famed velociraptor. The animals that created the most recent impressions were probably 5 to 6 1/2 feet tall and 13 to 16 feet long from mouth to tail, the researchers estimated.

Scientists think there may be other faster dinosaurs, but the tracks of theropods have been easier to track down.

"Behavior is something very difficult to study in dinosaurs," said lead author Pablo Navarro-Lorbés of the University of La Rioja. "These kind of findings are very important, I think, for improving that kind of knowledge."

Scientists typically predict dinosaur behavior through computer modeling of the creatures' movement. Physical examination of fossilized footprints confirm the results.

These are "clearly active, agile animals," said Smithsonian paleontologist Hans Sues, who had no role

in the study.

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

NY attorney general seeks Trump's testimony in civil probe

By MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — New York's attorney general is seeking former President Donald Trump's testimony in an ongoing civil investigation into his business practices, a person familiar with the matter said.

Attorney General Letitia James' office has requested that Trump sit for a deposition on Jan. 7, according to the person, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the ongoing investigation.

The news was first reported by The Washington Post.

Trump's representatives did not immediately respond to requests for comment. A message seeking comment was left with Trump's lawyer, Ronald Fischetti. James' office declined to comment.

A spokesperson for the Manhattan district attorney's office, which is conducting a parallel criminal investigation into Trump's business dealings, said Thursday that the interview request "is not part of the criminal investigation."

In the past, the Republican ex-president has decried the investigations as part of a "witch hunt."

James, a Democrat, has spent more than two years looking at whether Trump's company, the Trump Organization, misled banks or tax officials about the value of assets — inflating them to gain favorable loan terms or minimizing them to reap tax savings.

Requesting Trump's testimony is a first step in a process that could eventually lead to issuing a subpoena and going to a judge to order him to cooperate if he were to refuse.

James had announced a run for New York governor in late October, but on Thursday, she suspended that campaign and cited ongoing investigations in her decision to instead seek reelection as state attorney general.

James' investigators last year interviewed one of Trump's sons, Trump Organization executive Eric Trump, as part of the probe. James' office went to court to enforce a subpoena on the younger Trump and a judge forced him to testify after his lawyers abruptly canceled a previously scheduled deposition.

Although the civil investigation is separate from Manhattan District Attorney Cyrus Vance Jr.'s criminal investigation, James' office has been involved in both. Earlier this year, Vance gained access to the long-time real estate mogul's tax records after a multiyear fight that twice went to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Vance, who is leaving office at the end of the year, recently convened a new grand jury to hear evidence as he weighs whether to seek more indictments in the investigation, which resulted in tax fraud charges in July against the Trump Organization and its longtime CFO Allen Weisselberg.

Weisselberg pleaded not guilty to charges alleging he and the company evaded taxes on lucrative fringe benefits paid to executives.

Asked about the status of the criminal probe, Vance said last week: "I think it's pretty clear that our investigation is active and ongoing."

It is rare for law enforcement agencies to issue a civil subpoena for testimony from a person who is also the subject of a related criminal investigation.

That's partly because the person under criminal investigation could simply cite their Fifth Amendment right to remain silent. It is unlikely that Trump's lawyers would allow him to be deposed unless they were sure his testimony couldn't be used against him in a criminal case.

Both investigations are at least partly related to allegations made in news reports and by Trump's former personal lawyer, Michael Cohen, that Trump had a history of misrepresenting the value of assets.

James' office issued subpoenas to local governments as part of the civil probe for records pertaining to Trump's estate north of Manhattan, Seven Springs, and a tax benefit Trump received for placing land into a conservation trust. Vance later issued subpoenas seeking many of the same records.

James' office has also been looking at similar issues relating to a Trump office building in New York City, a hotel in Chicago and a golf course near Los Angeles. Her office also won a series of court rulings forcing Trump's company and a law firm it hired to turn over troves of records.

In October, Trump testified under oath behind closed doors for several hours during a deposition in a lawsuit brought by protesters who say his security team roughed them up in the early days of his presidential campaign in 2015.

Trump had faced a Dec. 23 deadline for questioning in former "Apprentice" contestant Summer Zervos' defamation lawsuit against him, but she dropped the case last month.

Trump was less cooperative with special counsel Robert Mueller's probe of Russian election interference. Mueller's team of investigators sought an interview with Trump for months and though Trump, at times, stated publicly that he was willing to sit down with them, his lawyers long resisted the overture.

Instead, Trump's lawyers in November 2018 submitted written responses on certain topics that Mueller's team regarded as "inadequate." Prosecutors in that matter decided against subpoenaing Trump to compel his testimony.

Associated Press reporters Jill Colvin in New York and Eric Tucker in Washington contributed to this report.

Follow Michael Sisak on Twitter at twitter.com/mikesisak

Reality TV's Josh Duggar convicted of child porn possession

FAYETTEVILLE, Ark. (AP) — Former reality TV star Josh Duggar was immediately taken into custody Thursday after a federal jury convicted him of downloading and possessing child pornography.

The jury in Fayetteville, about 140 miles (225 kilometers) northwest of Little Rock, found the 33-year-old Duggar guilty on one count each of receiving and possessing child pornography. He faces up to 20 years in prison and fines of up to \$250,000 for each count when he's sentenced.

"Regardless of wealth, social status, or fame, our office will continue to seek out all individuals who seek to abuse children and victimize them through the downloading, possession, and sharing of child pornography," said U.S. Attorney Clay Fowlkes of the western district of Arkansas, which prosecuted the case.

U.S. District Judge Timothy Brooks said sentencing will happen in about four months, Fayetteville TV station KNWA reported.

"We respect the jury's verdict and we look forward to continuing this fight on appeal," said Justin Gelfand, one of Duggar's defense attorneys.

Duggar and his large Arkansas family starred on TLC's "19 Kids and Counting" until the network canceled the show in 2015 following revelations that he had molested four of his sisters and a babysitter. Authorities began investigating the abuse in 2006 after receiving a tip from a family friend but concluded that the statute of limitations on any possible charges had expired.

Duggar's parents said he had confessed to the fondling and apologized. At the time, Duggar apologized publicly for unspecified behavior and resigned as a lobbyist for the Family Research Council, a conservative Christian group.

Duggar later apologized for a pornography addiction and for cheating on his wife, calling himself "the biggest hypocrite ever."

The judge in the child porn case ruled that jurors could hear testimony about how in 2003, Duggar admitted to molesting four girls. A family friend testified that Duggar told her about the abuse.

Federal authorities said they began investigating after a Little Rock police detective found child porn files were being shared by a computer traced to Duggar. A federal agent testified in May that images depicting the sexual abuse of children, including toddlers, were downloaded in 2019 onto a computer at a car dealership Duggar owned.

Duggar's attorney argued that someone else downloaded or uploaded the images onto Duggar's computer. But the jury wasn't swayed.

Duggar's father Jim Bob Duggar, who also starred on the reality show, is running in a special election for a vacant state Senate seat in northwestern Arkansas, and the primary election in that race is Tuesday. He previously served in the Arkansas House.

Women breaking through to top roles in Black churches

By ADELLE M. BANKS of Religion News Service and PETER SMITH of The Associated Press
When an opening for bishop arose in the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church in 2010, Teresa Jefferson-Snorton looked around to see if any women were offering to be candidates.

None were.

She knew that since its founding 140 years earlier by Black Methodists emerging from slavery, the denomination had never elected a woman bishop.

"I was like, oh my goodness, this can't be," she recalled. "If no one steps forward, it gives the church a pass."

Jefferson-Snorton, who had spent decades as a pastor, chaplain and theological educator, undertook several months of intensive prayer before discerning she was "feeling a call to this" from God. Then she put her name forward.

"To an extent, it was a political statement," said Jefferson-Snorton.

Despite opposition from some who said the denomination wasn't ready for a woman bishop, she was elected the CME's 59th bishop, overseeing 217 churches across Alabama and Florida.

This story is part of a series by The Associated Press and Religion News Service on women's roles in male-led religions.

Jefferson-Snorton said people there have come to accept her in the role — if awkwardly at times.

"I can't tell you how many times people said, 'Yes sir,' to me," she said. "I just remind them, 'Yes ma'am' is OK."

Eleven years later, she remains the CME's only woman bishop, a status made vivid in an official photo of the church's college of bishops, where she sits among 16 men, all in purple and white vestments.

Most major Black Christian denominations in the U.S. have no doctrinal bar to ordained women leaders in the way that Catholicism and some other denominations do, and women have preached and been ordained in historically Black churches since at least the 19th century.

Yet denominational leadership remained all-male until the 21st century, and women are still the exception in the top rungs.

Earlier this year, the Rev. Gina Stewart became the first woman president of a major Black Baptist organization, the Lott Carey Baptist Foreign Mission Society, an organization that responds to disasters and fights poverty, hunger and human trafficking.

"Whenever a woman is placed in a role that is traditionally male, there's always some negativity that surrounds it," Stewart said, but in her first 90 days as president, she has received congratulatory calls from some male denominational leaders and support from her male predecessors, without encountering "any major resistance."

"There's a shifting taking place," Stewart said, noting that more women have been promoted to lead important departments in the church.

"We know that it's long overdue," added Stewart, who is the senior pastor of Christ Missionary Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee. "But we give those organizations that are making the effort credit, taking the initiative and giving women that opportunity."

Religious organizations still need to do more to provide women chances for leadership development, said the Rev. Maisha Handy, associate professor of religion and education at the Interdenominational Theological Center, a consortium of historically African American seminaries in Atlanta.

"We've certainly made strides around that in recent years, in recent decades, but we still have a long

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way to go," said Handy, who is also executive director of the Center for Black Women's Justice at ITC.

Women pastors often receive assignments to smaller congregations with fewer resources or opportunities to gain experience and preparation for denominational leadership, Handy said.

"It's not just about ordination. It's about placement," said Handy.

When Black denominations got their start in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, according to Handy, their biblical interpretations were affected by the cultural attitudes around them. "When you think about the kind of patriarchy and misogyny that is intrinsic to American history and culture, it makes sense that it was reflected also in those denominations," she said.

To be sure, women have long exercised authority in non-ordained roles, outnumbering men in local church membership and also leading their own organizations within denominations.

But from the first, women had limited access to the pulpit, though some challenged those barriers.

"If the man may preach, because the savior died for him, why not the woman?" Jarena Lee, the first woman lay preacher in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, asked in the early 19th century.

A sister denomination, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, ordained Mary Small, its first woman minister, in 1898. By the mid-20th century, the CME and AME churches were ordaining women as well. Records are less precise among the more decentralized Baptists, but women's ordination was long the exception among them.

In 2000, Vashti Murphy McKenzie was elected the first woman bishop in the AME Church. McKenzie, now retired, was later joined by more women bishops, though men still comprise most of the AME episcopacy. The AME Zion Church followed, electing Mildred "Bonnie" Hines bishop in 2008, as did the CME with Jefferson-Snorton in 2010.

Jefferson-Snorton, who in October was elected chair of the governing board of the National Council of Churches, said she is still sometimes questioned about biblical passages that are cited to justify giving men sole power to preach or lead. She cites other passages, such as one declaring that in Christ there is neither male nor female.

"I often start with the story of Resurrection morning," when Jesus' female followers were told to "go and proclaim" he had risen from the dead, she added.

"If Jesus had not intended for women to be bearers of good news, that would never have happened," said Jefferson-Snorton.

But to those who are "more hostile" in questioning women's ministry, "I often say to them, 'God called me to this ministry, so if you have a problem with it, you need to talk to God, because I did not call myself,'" she said.

In the Church of God in Christ, a historically Black Pentecostal denomination, women have made their influence felt in other ways. Traditionally only men have been recognized as ordained ministers or bishops, while women have led its Women's Department, which oversees auxiliaries. COGIC officials didn't respond to questions about women's roles in the denomination.

But after the death of her husband, COGIC's first elected presiding bishop, Mother Mary P. Patterson, a retired real estate agent who headed her own travel agency, founded the Pentecostal Heritage Connection, dedicated to planting historical markers honoring COGIC leaders across the South. In November, a ceremony unveiling the final marker, an 8-foot aluminum sign on a corner in Little Rock, Arkansas, was attended by regional religious leaders, a representative of the governor and scholars who traveled to the state for the occasion.

Sherry Sherrod DuPree, a Florida historian and former president of the Society for Pentecostal Studies, said Patterson's effort is an example of how women lead in a denomination known for its patriarchal hierarchy.

"She is a quiet praying lady who 'stays in her lane' but is active in getting jobs done without fanfare, one of the skills of COGIC women," said DuPree.

Patterson said, "it shows other young women that you don't have to be behind the pulpit in order to do a work for the Lord."

Associated Press religion coverage receives support from the Lilly Endowment through The Conversation U.S. The AP is solely responsible for this content.

In Buddhism, women blaze a path but strive for gender equity

By LUIS ANDRES HENAO Associated Press

Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, born in England, has devoted her life to attaining enlightenment in a female form — at one stage spending years isolated in a cave in the Himalayas to follow the rigorous path of the most devoted yogis. She later founded a nunnery in India focused on giving women in Tibetan Buddhism some of the same opportunities reserved for monks.

Venerable Dhammananda renounced her family life and a prestigious academic career in Thailand to follow the path of the Buddha. She then defied her homeland's unequal status of women in Buddhist practice by traveling to Sri Lanka to become Thailand's first fully ordained nun in Theravada, one of the oldest forms of Buddhism.

Born a world apart, they're among a group of respected female monastics or "bhikkhunis," lay persons and academics who have challenged longstanding patriarchal traditions. They have blazed a path of progress in recent decades for Buddhist women — from education through advanced degrees and the creation of nunneries to seeking full ordination.

Across branches, though, many at the movement's forefront say more needs to be accomplished so women can have equal opportunities.

"It's shifting because now there's so much more interest in the feminine. Not just in Buddhism, but worldwide, why have women been so neglected and overlooked for millennia?" said Palmo. About 100 nuns live and study at her Dongyu Gatsal Ling nunnery in India.

This story is part of a series by The Associated Press and Religion News Service on women's roles in male-led religions.

Women were included in Buddhism since its earliest years, and their monastic ordination dates back more than 2,500 years, said Judith Simmer-Brown, emeritus professor of contemplative and religious studies at Colorado's Naropa University, a liberal arts school associated with Buddhism. But as monasticism spread from India to other countries, there often were extra requirements to become ordained in those patriarchal societies.

"Full ordination for women has been very difficult," Simmer-Brown said about some branches. "Even though Buddhist teachings always say that women have equal ability to become enlightened and may even be better suited for enlightenment than men."

In the past 25 years, as Buddhism has grown in the West and Asian Buddhist societies have been influenced by feminism, there's more awareness of the importance of women's leadership, she said.

In Buddhism, women's status varies across countries and branches that follow different traditions and practices. Women can be ordained as the equivalent of monks in China, South Korea, Taiwan and Vietnam, mostly dominated by the Mahayana school of Buddhism. Female ordination is not available in the Tibetan tradition nor in Cambodia, Laos or Myanmar.

Women are also banned from becoming monks in Thailand, where over 90% of the population is Buddhist. Historically, women could only become white-cloaked nuns often treated as glorified temple housekeepers. But dozens have traveled to Sri Lanka to receive full ordination.

Dhammananda, the pioneering Thai nun, was a respected Buddhist scholar and television personality before her ordination. One day she looked in a mirror and heard an inner voice asking: "How long must I do this?" She took vows of celibacy and decided to live apart from her three sons, traveling to Sri Lanka for her novice ordination in 2001.

When she returned to Thailand with a shaved head and wearing the saffron robes reserved for men, she faced criticism for defying the Buddhist male-led hierarchy. They'd say: "Imagine a woman putting on

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the robe, she must be crazy," said Dhammananda, who was fully ordained in 2003.

Two decades later, she said, people on the street no longer "look at you with puzzled eyes" because Thailand now has over 280 fully ordained women nationwide, though they and their monasteries aren't legally recognized and don't receive state funding.

Dhammananda contends that Buddha built the religion as a four-legged stool — monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen.

"We are on the right side of history," she said.

The women live simple lifestyles and are governed by 311 precepts, including celibacy. Their ranks and those of hundreds of aspirants include a former Google executive, a Harvard graduate, journalists and doctors, as well as village noodle vendors.

Buddhist Thai women have been playing more important roles, said Kritsana Raksachom, a nun and lecturer at Bangkok's Maha Chulalongkorn Rajavidyalaya University. They increasingly lead meditation courses with both male and female followers, teach Buddhism and Pali languages to monks and novices in public Buddhist universities, and run charities.

In Sri Lanka, the bhikkhuni order was established in the 3rd century B.C. following Buddhism's introduction from India but later disappeared due to foreign invasions and other factors. It wasn't until the late '80s and '90s when the first Sri Lankan nuns in more than a millennium received their higher ordination.

Peradeniye Dhammashanti, a nun at the Paramita International Buddhist Meditation Center in Sri Lanka, said lay women and bhikkhunis have made significant progress. But she regrets they still lack adequate education and places to meditate.

Buddhist women in Japan focus on caring for the bereaved, mentally ill, elders and families, said Paula Arai, a religious studies professor at Louisiana State University. The ranks of male and female monastics are the same, and women "have this 'chutzpah' because when the tradition was introduced in Japan in the sixth century, women were the first to be fully ordained, Arai said.

In Tibetan Buddhism, nuns have achieved many of the privileges historically reserved for monks. They include studying for the geshema, the tradition's highest and most demanding degree, which was denied to them for centuries.

"The balance is shifting because now, certainly in Tibetan Buddhism, the nuns are highly educated and have the same degrees as the monks," Palmo said. "They are also teaching, and so their confidence level has risen enormously."

Still, she laments that in the Tibetan tradition, women can only become novice nuns and not fully ordained.

"They're sort of standing in the doorway, but they're not entering," said Palmo. "It's sad that there is such resistance."

After witnessing unequal opportunities for women, Venerable Karma Lekshe Tsomo made it her lifelong mission to address the imbalance.

Born in California, she grew up surfing and traveled to Asia in the 1950s when it was hard to find teachers, monasteries and Buddhism books. She studied with masters of Tibetan Buddhism and, in the late '80s, organized a pioneering international conference of Buddhist women in the same village where the Buddha became awakened. She went on to create the Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women and an education project for women that runs schools in Bangladesh, Laos and the Himalayas.

"To achieve that highest level, women need the same tools to work with, the same opportunities that men have," said Tsomo, who is a professor of Buddhist Studies at the University of San Diego.

Author and journalist Michaela Haas praised Tsomo, Palmo and other women profiled in her book "Dakini Power: Twelve Extraordinary Women Shaping the Transmission of Tibetan Buddhism in the West." But she's disappointed by the lack of progress.

"We should be further along, and despite these great women teachers, the tradition hasn't changed that much," she said.

"They have to work extra hard and do double the work and be super, super qualified." Meanwhile in some monasteries, she said, women, even nuns, are tasked with cooking and laundry, "so it's still an old-

fashioned understanding of gender roles.”

Venerable Thubten Chodron, who first traveled to India in the 1970s to study under the Dalai Lama and other Tibetan Buddhism masters, said she has seen “enormous” positive change for nuns since then. In 2003 she opened Sravasti Abbey, in Washington state, the only Tibetan Buddhist training monastery for Western monks and nuns in America.

The day starts before dawn with teachings and meditation followed by chanting sessions.

“I’m training all those people who will come who have a sincere motivation and want to follow the discipline that we keep here,” said Chodron, who has written books with the Dalai Lama and also authored “Buddhism for Beginners.”

One of her students is Thubten Damcho, 38. Born in Singapore, she was introduced to Buddhism at Princeton University. After graduation she met Chodron, received her novice ordination at Sravasti Abbey and was fully ordained in Taiwan.

“It was some time in my ordination before I understood, ‘Oh, this ordination is not available to all women,’” Damcho said. “I’m living in a time where this is possible again, and how rare and amazing that is.”

AP journalists Bharatha Mallawarachi in Colombo, Sri Lanka, and Grant Peck and Chalida Ekvitthayavech-nukul in Bangkok contributed to this report.

Associated Press religion coverage receives support from the Lilly Endowment through The Conversation U.S. The AP is solely responsible for this content.

EU plan to boost gig economy workers is latest blow to apps

By KELVIN CHAN AP Business Writer

LONDON (AP) — A new European Union plan to improve conditions for the growing number of gig economy workers could mean millions more of them are classified as employees entitled to benefits, the latest setback for digital platforms that rely on independent contractors to deliver food and offer rides.

The draft rules outlined Thursday aim to clarify the labor status of people employed by app-based companies like ride-hailing service Uber and food delivery business Deliveroo and would add oversight for the algorithms they use to manage workers.

Gig economy workers and platforms have fallen between the cracks of existing employment legislation, and the measures being considered by the 27-nation bloc, which would take years to come into force, are aimed at clearing up those gray areas.

App-based gig work platforms have boomed in the digital economy, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic when demand for food delivery services mushroomed. While the apps provide short-term work for millions of people, their rampant growth has upended traditional labor and business models, resulting in showdowns between companies and regulators worldwide. Gig work’s flexibility is a selling point for many, but workers also complain that they end up making less than minimum wage after expenses or waiting time are accounted for.

Under the EU rules, which still need approval by the European Parliament, a platform that meets at least two criteria will be deemed an “employer” and people working for that company will be reclassified as “workers” with the right to a minimum wage, paid vacation, pensions and unemployment and sickness benefits.

The criteria include whether an app decides pay levels; electronically supervises work performance; restricts a worker’s freedom to choose work hours, accept jobs or use subcontractors; dictates a worker’s appearance and conduct with customers; or limits the possibility for workers to build their own client bases or work for anyone else.

Uber says it’s committed to improving work conditions but worries about the EU proposal “putting thousands of jobs at risk, crippling small businesses in the wake of the pandemic and damaging vital services that consumers across Europe rely on.”

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"Any EU-wide rules should allow drivers and couriers to retain the flexibility we know they value most, while allowing platforms to introduce more protections and benefits," a statement from the ride-hailing service said.

Amsterdam-based Just Eat Takeaway, which operates in 25 countries and owns brands including Grub-Hub, said it "welcomes and fully supports" the proposals and hopes they will provide companies across Europe with "clarity and a level playing field." Unlike other food delivery platforms, the company's riders are employed as staff, which it says "proves that providing flexibility doesn't have to come at the expense of workers' rights."

The European Commission, the EU's executive branch, estimates some 28 million people on the continent are self-employed on digital platforms, rising to 43 million by 2025, but predicts as many as 4.1 million could be reclassified as employees under the rules. The EU has taken a leading global role in cracking down on tech companies to ensure everything from workers' rights to online safety.

Platforms can challenge the classification, but the burden will be on them to prove they are not employers, the commission said.

"No one is trying to kill, to stop or to hamper this growth of the platform economy," EU Jobs and Social Rights Commissioner Nicolas Schmit said at a press briefing in Brussels. But "it comes down to ensuring that these jobs are quality jobs. ... We don't want this new economy just giving low quality or precarious jobs."

The proposed EU rules are another blow for gig economy companies in Europe. New laws or recent court rulings in Spain, the Netherlands and Britain require food delivery riders and ride-service drivers to be given employee status rather than classified as self-employed freelancers.

There have been more than 100 court decisions across Europe on the issue, with most judges ruling that independent contractors are employees — something the commission took into account as it drafted its directive.

In contrast, Uber and other app-based services avoided an attempt in California to classify workers as employees, though the battle continues in the courts.

The European Commission also wants to force gig work platforms to be more transparent about the algorithms used to manage workers so they can better understand how jobs are assigned and pay is set. People should oversee the algorithms and workers should be able to appeal any automated decisions, it said.

In Spain, gig worker Sebastián Honorato, who makes deliveries by motorbike, said a new national law introduced this year hasn't resulted in the benefits the government promised. He said it's unfair because it only regulates food delivery riders, while others like Amazon package delivery drivers aren't covered.

And instead of hiring gig workers directly, foreign tech platforms in Spain resorted to temporary staffing agencies. Honorata, a spokesman for the Association of Freelance Riders, said he used to bring in over 1,600 euros (\$1,800) a month after paying his social security costs but now makes 900 euros in a good month.

Honorata, who lives in the southern Spanish city of Granada, said delivery workers should be regulated the same way across Europe but worried Brussels' approach could produce results similar to Spain's model.

"What we wanted was not to be an employee, nor completely freelancers. We wanted an intermediate model, like they have in California," Honorata said. Before the Spanish law, gig work "was an economically viable model, even if it had a murky legal status. We wanted to give it a legal framework, but not lose any of its viability. Now, it is a disaster."

Associated Press writer Joseph Wilson in Barcelona contributed to this report. Follow Kelvin Chan on Twitter.

See all of AP's tech coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/technology>.

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 descendant 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.

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.

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"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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AP-NORC Poll: Income is up, but Americans focus on inflation

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER and HANNAH FINGERHUT Associated Press Writers

WASHINGTON (AP) — Americans' overall income has accelerated since the pandemic, but so has inflation — and a new poll finds that far more people are noticing the higher prices than the pay gains.

Two-thirds say their household costs have risen since the pandemic, compared with only about a quarter who say their incomes have increased, according to a poll by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. Half say their incomes have stayed the same. Roughly a quarter report that their incomes have dropped.

The fast-rising prices that have been surging through the economy have forced many Americans to change their spending habits. About one-third say, for example, that they're driving less often, and roughly 3 in 10 Americans say they're buying less meat than they usually do. In the past year, gas prices have jumped nearly 50%, and the cost of meat is up 15%.

Most people say the sharply higher prices for goods and services in recent months have had at least a minor effect on their financial lives, including about 4 in 10 who say the hit has been substantial. The poll confirms that the burden has been especially hard on low-income households.

On Friday, when the government will issue its latest reading on consumer prices, it's expected to report that inflation soared 6.7% in November compared with a year earlier, according to economists surveyed by data provider FactSet. That would top October's 6.2% year-over-year increase and would mark the highest consumer inflation rate in nearly four decades.

The findings in the AP-NORC poll underscore the financial pressures that this year's spike in inflation has imposed on many Americans' finances. Still, as they have since before the pandemic struck in March 2020, a majority say their own finances remain good.

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Yet many Americans have soured on the economy in the past year, even though most economic indicators point to a still-steady recovery, with near-record job openings, solid retail spending and a rebound in manufacturing. Only about one-third say the economy is "good," down from about half who said so in March. That may illustrate why President Joe Biden hasn't benefited politically from positive readings on the economy.

The poll, though, finds a sharp partisan split: Only about 1 in 10 Republicans describe the economy as "good"; more than half of Democrats say so. Yet when asked about their own financial situations, people are more positive and less divided along party lines. About two-thirds of Americans say their personal finances are in good shape. Roughly 7 in 10 Democrats and about 6 in 10 Republicans say so.

Analysts generally expect the economy to grow at a brisk 7% annual rate in the final three months of this year, boosting growth for all of 2021 to its fastest calendar-year pace since 1984. The unemployment rate has dwindled to 4.2%, from 6.7% a year ago. And with many employers struggling to hire, the economy still has nearly 4 million fewer jobs than it did before the pandemic.

U.S. households, on average, are earning higher incomes than they did before the pandemic. Wages and salaries grew 4.2% in September compared with a year earlier, the largest annual increase in two decades of records. And the government provided a \$1,400 stimulus check to all households in March as well as a \$300-a-week unemployment aid supplement from March to September. Most households with children began receiving the \$300 monthly child tax credit in July.

Those government measures, combined with higher paychecks, lifted Americans' overall household incomes by 5.9% in October compared with a year earlier. Yet inflation jumped to 6.2% that month, the highest reading in three decades, negating the income gain.

Jason Furman, President Barack Obama's former top economic adviser, suggested that many people don't think about government payments, such as stimulus checks, when considering their own incomes because those payments are generally one-time windfalls.

A likely factor in Americans' worries about inflation is that rising prices have been concentrated in highly visible categories: The poll finds that 85% say they paid higher-than-usual prices for food and gas in recent months. Nearly 6 in 10 say the same about electricity. About 4 in 10 say they bought appliances recently and that the prices were higher than normal.

The effect is even more pronounced among middle- and lower-income Americans: Half of people in households earning less than \$50,000 a year say the price increases have had a major impact on their finances. Only a third of those in households earning more than \$50,000 say the same.

The AP-NORC poll of 1,089 adults was conducted Dec. 2-7 using a sample drawn from NORC's probability-based AmeriSpeak Panel, which is designed to be representative of the U.S. population. The margin of sampling error for all respondents is plus or minus 4.1 percentage points.

US jobless claims at 52-year low amid seasonal volatility

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits plunged last week to the lowest level in 52 years, more evidence that the U.S. job market is recovering from last year's coronavirus recession.

Unemployment claims dropped by 43,000 to 184,000 last week, the lowest since September 1969, the Labor Department said Thursday. The four-week moving average, which smooths out week-to-week ups and downs, fell below 219,000, lowest since the pandemic hit the United States hard in March 2020.

Seasonal volatility likely contributed to last week's drop as the Labor Department adjusted the numbers to reflect job market fluctuations around the holidays, said Stephen Stanley, chief economist at Amherst Pierpont Securities. Before seasonal adjustments, claims actually rose by nearly 64,000 to almost 281,000.

Still, Stanley said in a research note that "the underlying trend remains downward and should be lower than it was prior to the pandemic ... The unfilled demand for workers is much larger than it was then and

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layoffs appear to be noticeably lower.”

Overall, just under 2 million Americans were collecting traditional unemployment benefits the week that ended Nov. 27.

Weekly claims, which are a proxy for layoffs, have fallen steadily most of the year since topping 900,000 one week in early January. They are now below to the 220,000-a-week level typical before the coronavirus pandemic slammed the U.S. economy in March 2020; COVID-19 forced consumers to stay home as health precaution and businesses to close or reduce hours and to lay off staff. In March and April last year, employers shed a staggering 22.4 million jobs.

Massive government aid and the rollout of vaccines helped revive the economy and the job market by giving Americans the confidence and financial wherewithal to go on a shopping spree, often online, for goods such as lawn furniture and coffee makers. Since April last year, the United States has regained nearly 18.5 million jobs. But the economy is still 3.9 million jobs short of where it stood in February 2020 and the prospects for the economy remain vulnerable to COVID variants such as omicron.

The Labor Department reported last week that employers added a disappointing 210,000 jobs last month. But the report also showed that the unemployment rate dropped to a pandemic low of 4.2% from 4.6% in October.

And the department reported Wednesday that employers posted a near-record 11 million job openings in October. It also said that 4.2 million people quit their jobs — just off the September record of 4.4 million — a sign that they are confident enough in their prospects to look for something better.

Until Sept. 6, the federal government had supplemented state unemployment insurance programs by paying an extra payment of \$300 a week and extending benefits to gig workers and to those who were out of work for six months or more. Including the federal programs, the number of Americans receiving some form of jobless aid peaked at more than 33 million in June 2020.

Pence navigates Trump’s shadow during New Hampshire visit

By JILL COLVIN Associated Press

MANCHESTER, N.H. (AP) — There were all the trappings of a day on the presidential campaign trail: a fundraiser, schmoozing with local activists, holiday parties and a visit to a local bakery, where the potential candidate posed for pictures and bought a slice of cake.

But former Vice President Mike Pence insisted his tightly scheduled swing through New Hampshire on Wednesday was simply focused on next year’s midterms, when control of Congress is at stake.

“To be honest with you, all of my focus is on 2022 because I think we’ve got a historic opportunity for not just a winning election, but a realignment election,” he told The Associated Press. “So I’m dedicating all of my energy to the process of really winning back the Congress and winning statehouses in 2022. And then in 2023, we’ll look around and we’ll go where we’re called.”

Pence’s approach belies the fact that he isn’t just any Republican courting the voters and activists in this state that helps decide presidential nominations. He’s arguably tied more closely to former President Donald Trump than any other Republican eyeing the White House. While that should be a boon in a party dominated by Trump loyalists, it’s a unique vulnerability for Pence, who is blamed by some supporters of the former president who wrongly believe he could have prevented Joe Biden from assuming the presidency in January.

Adding to the complexity is the prospect that Trump may also run again in 2024. At least for now, polls suggest he would run away with the GOP nomination.

That leaves Pence, whose life was threatened by Trump supporters at the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, in a bind. Some fellow Republicans considering a campaign, including former U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley, have said they won’t run if Trump moves forward. Others, such as former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, have dismissed the notion that a Trump candidacy should automatically clear the field.

Pence is opting for a middle ground, spending much of his time talking up his and Trump’s time in office and insisting the two parted ways on good terms. In interviews, for instance, he declined to take a side

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in the GOP primary for governor in Georgia, which features incumbent Brian Kemp against Trump-backed challenger and former Sen. David Perdue. He similarly sidestepped the question of what Trump's calculations mean for him.

But he's clear that he's not waiting for his old boss to make a decision as he travels the country, delivers speeches and raises money.

"Come 2023, we'll reflect, we'll pray and we'll respond to that calling, whatever that is," he said.

Much of Trump's base remains livid that Pence refused the former president's demand to block certification of the 2020 election — something he did not have power to do. And critics of Trump are unlikely to embrace a man who almost never voiced disagreement with the former president and who continues to yoke himself to that administration.

Still, on Wednesday, Pence was greeted warmly during his second New Hampshire visit since leaving office.

In a speech sponsored by the conservative Heritage Action organization, Pence blamed Biden for the country's soaring inflation and railed against the roughly \$2 trillion social and environmental bill that is being considered in Congress.

"Keep your hands off the American people's paychecks," he demanded.

At the Simply Delicious bakery in Bedford, Pence greeted customers and posed for selfies. The bakery was featured in ads from the Coalition to Protect American Workers, a conservative group run by Pence's former chief of staff, Marc Short, and fined for violating COVID-19 mask regulations.

"We miss you very much," the bakery's owner, Alexa Firman, told Pence as the two chatted and posed for photos.

After four years of playing second fiddle to Trump, Pence's increasingly busy schedule of travel and speeches gives him what aides see as an opportunity to reassert himself as the frontman.

"For four years he played a different role," said Short. "He had a role to advance the president's policies and to articulate them. And now he's in a position to speak more freely."

But after so much deference, it remains unclear whether Pence can emerge from Trump's shadow and make a compelling case to voters that he should be the future of a party that has been so dramatically redrawn in the former president's image.

In interviews, voters who attended the events generally praised Pence but didn't express the kind of unbridled enthusiasm often reserved for Trump.

"I think he's a reasonable candidate. I'm personally in favor of any Republican who has Trump's policies without Trump's personal ego," said Fred Yocum, of Brentwood, New Hampshire. "I think there are a lot of really good candidates potentially out there. And Mike Pence is certainly one of those."

Edie Olson, a lumber building materials supplier from Nashua, said it was too soon for him to have taken stock of the potential field, but he, too, is ready for an alternative to Trump.

"I think it's time for a professional politician once again," he said. "Leave it to the professionals."

Bill Ohm, who also lives in Nashua and is running to represent the area as a state representative, praised Pence as "a really solid guy. He's kind of like the quiet, thoughtful guy that you can count on. He's not blustering, but he's very very competent."

But while he said that, in looking for a president, "you want a guy who's going to be calm and disciplined," he said if Trump runs again, he'd likely back him instead.

"I'd probably vote for Trump because I think he's got a little more experience in the big chair. I mean, Mike's got a great background in solving problems. But I think dealing with the world's problems, you've got to have a guy who can be a little tougher than most people," he said.

Pence, meanwhile, continues to confront the fallout from the insurrection.

He has repeatedly defended his actions, saying he upheld his constitutional duty and had no choice but to count the Electoral College votes. On Wednesday, he again acknowledged in a radio interview that he and Trump may "never see eye to eye" on what happened that day, when he and his family were forced into hiding as the riotous mob of Trump supporters violently stormed the Capitol building, some chanting "Hang Mike Pence." At the same time, he told several news outlets "there were irregularities that happened

at the state level," even though no evidence has emerged of any serious fraud.

As if on cue, Trump knocked Pence yet again during his New Hampshire swing, issuing a statement calling him a "good man," but someone who made a "big mistake on not recognizing the massive voter fraud and irregularities."

Pence has also paid recent visits to other early-voting states such as Iowa, South Carolina and Nevada. He's been writing a book, delivering paid speeches and fundraising on behalf of Republican candidates — making friends and building relationships with donors who could help him down the line.

He's also recording a weekly podcast, "American Freedom," as part of his work with Young America's Foundation, in addition to running his own issues advocacy group, Advancing American Freedom.

Chris Ager, a member of the Republican National Committee from New Hampshire who spent time Wednesday with Pence, said that while the state's primary is more than two years away, election season has begun.

"This is campaign season for 2024. It's already started," he said. And while some are waiting for Trump to move, others "are doing the smart thing by preparing so they can keep their options open, regardless of what President Trump does. That seems to me like a very savvy thing to do."

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-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 in-

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ected,” 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>.

Witness, official: Myanmar troops massacre 11 civilians

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.

A video of the aftermath of Tuesday’s assault — apparently 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 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,” researcher 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.”

Opposition spokesperson, Dr. Sasa, said the attack began after a military convoy — which was raiding villages in the country’s northwest — hit a roadside bomb. Troops retaliated first by shelling the village of

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Done Taw, then rounding up anyone they could capture there.

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

"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.

That group declared itself the country's only legitimate leaders in the wake of the military takeover on Feb. 1 that prevented elected lawmakers from taking their seats in parliament. The seizure of power 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. In recent months, fighting has been raging in northwestern areas.

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."

The government has denied that it had any troops in the area. But a witness told The Associated Press that about 50 troops marched into Done Taw 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 widely distributed images were taken. The images themselves could not be independently verified.

The witness said that those captured 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 and did not give a reason for the soldiers' assault.

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

Dujarric, of the U.N., 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 people, including more than 75 children, since the military takeover.

In seizing power, the military claimed there was massive fraud in the 2020 election that saw Aung San 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 in the voting.

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.

This story has been updated to correct Manny Maung's title to researcher, not spokesperson.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, Dec. 10, the 344th day of 2021. There are 21 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 10, 1994, Yasser Arafat, Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Rabin received the Nobel Peace Prize, pledg-

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ing to pursue their mission of healing the anguished Middle East.

On this date:

In 1817, Mississippi was admitted as the 20th state of the Union.

In 1861, the Confederacy admitted Kentucky as it recognized a pro-Southern shadow state government that was acting without the authority of the pro-Union government in Frankfort.

In 1898, a treaty was signed in Paris officially ending the Spanish-American War.

In 1950, Ralph J. Bunche was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, becoming the first Black American to receive the award.

In 1964, Martin Luther King Jr. received his Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, saying he accepted it "with an abiding faith in America and an audacious faith in the future of mankind."

In 1967, singer Otis Redding, 26, and six others were killed when their plane crashed into Wisconsin's Lake Monona; trumpeter Ben Cauley, a member of the group the Bar-Kays, was the only survivor.

In 1996, South African President Nelson Mandela signed the country's new constitution into law during a ceremony in Sharpeville.

In 2005, actor-comedian Richard Pryor died in Encino, California, at age 65.

In 2006, Former Chilean dictator General Augusto Pinochet died at age 91.

In 2007, former Vice President Al Gore accepted the Nobel Peace Prize with a call for humanity to rise up against a looming climate crisis and stop waging war on the environment.

In 2013, South Africa held a memorial service for Nelson Mandela, during which U.S. President Barack Obama energized tens of thousands of spectators and nearly 100 visiting heads of state with a plea for the world to emulate "the last great liberator of the 20th century." (The ceremony was marred by the presence of a sign-language interpreter who deaf advocates said was an impostor waving his arms around meaninglessly.) General Motors named product chief Mary Barra its new CEO, making her the first woman to run a U.S. car company.

In 2019, House Democrats announced two articles of impeachment against President Donald Trump, declaring that he "betrayed the nation" with his actions toward Ukraine and an obstruction of Congress' investigation; Trump responded with a tweet of "WITCH HUNT!" At an evening rally in Pennsylvania, Trump mocked the impeachment effort and predicted it would lead to his reelection in 2020.

Ten years ago: Tens of thousands of Russians staged anti-government protests, charging electoral fraud and demanding an end to Vladimir Putin's rule. Robert Griffin III beat out preseason favorite Andrew Luck to win the Heisman Trophy.

Five years ago: Donald Trump's presidential transition team challenged the veracity of U.S. intelligence assessments that Russia had tried to tip the November election in his favor. Louisiana voters chose to send Republican state Treasurer John Kennedy to the nation's capital, filling the nation's last U.S. Senate seat and giving the GOP a 52-48 edge in the chamber when the new term began. In college football, Army ended a 14-year run of frustration against Navy with a 21-17 victory. Sophomore quarterback Lamar Jackson became the first Louisville player to win the Heisman Trophy.

One year ago: A U.S. government advisory panel endorsed widespread use of Pfizer's coronavirus vaccine, putting the country one step away from launching an epic vaccination campaign. (The Food and Drug administration would authorize the vaccine the following day.) States drafted plans for who would get the first doses of the COVID-19 vaccine, as the nation's death toll from the pandemic surpassed 3,100 in a single day for the first time. The U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee heeded calls from American athletes by announcing that it wouldn't penalize them for raising their fists or kneeling on the medals stand at the Tokyo Games and beyond. The Minneapolis City Council unanimously voted to shift about \$8 million away from the police department and toward violence prevention and other programs, while keeping intact the mayor's targeted staffing levels for sworn officers.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Fionnula Flanagan is 80. Pop singer Chad Stuart (Chad and Jeremy) Actor-singer Gloria Loring is 75. Pop-funk musician Walter "Clyde" Orange (The Commodores) is 75. Country singer Johnny Rodriguez is 70. Actor Susan Dey is 69. Former Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich is 65. Jazz musician Paul Hardcastle is 64. Actor John York (TV: "General Hospital") is 63. Actor-director Kenneth Branagh

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(BRAH'-nah) is 61. Actor Nia Peeples is 60. TV chef Bobby Flay is 57. Rock singer-musician J Mascis is 56. Rock musician Scot Alexander (Dishwalla) is 50. Actor-comedian Arden Myrin is 48. Rock musician Meg White (The White Stripes) is 47. Actor Emmanuelle Chriqui is 46. Actor Gavin Houston is 44. Actor Alano Miller is 42. Violinist Sarah Chang is 41. Actor Patrick John Flueger is 38. Country singer Meghan Linsey is 36. Actor Raven-Symone is 36. Actor/singer Teyana Taylor is 31. Actor Kiki Layne is 30.