

Groton Daily Independent

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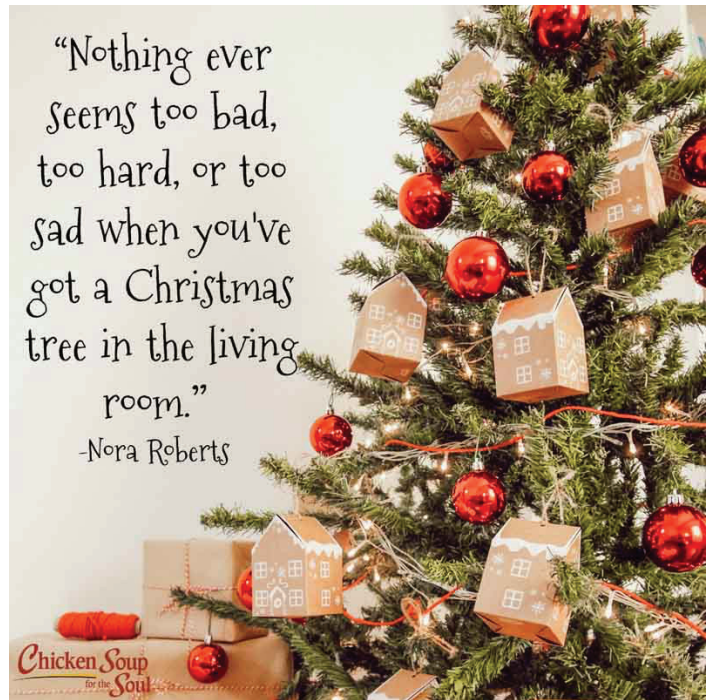
UpComing Events

Saturday, Dec. 18

Brookings Bell Debate

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

Boys Basketball at Sioux Falls Lutheran. JV at 1 p.m. with varsity to follow.



Aberdeen's AN+ fades away

We learned this morning that the AN+ that was published by the Aberdeen American News has faded away into the sunset. I had noticed that the publication was not updated in the vending machine on Main Street so I asked about it. They stopped printing it the first week in December, which was the time they switched to Des Moines, IA for printing the paper. And to think that at one time, Aberdeen used to have two shopper publications, and now they have none.

South Dakota Reports First Flu Death of Season

PIERRE, S.D. – Today, the South Dakota Department of Health reported the first influenza death of the 2021-2022 season.

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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NSIC North foe Minnesota Duluth nips Wolves

Aberdeen, S.D. - Minnesota Duluth, ranked 17th in the nation in the latest NCAA Division II poll, narrowly defeated the Northern State men's basketball program Friday evening, using a late second-half push to claim a 69-66 victory over the Wolves at Wachs Arena. The loss snaps a modest 3-game win streak for the Wolves and is their first home loss of the season.

QUICK HITS

Final score: Minnesota Duluth 69, Northern State 66

Records: Northern State 9-5, 3-3 NSIC; Minnesota Duluth 12-1, 6-0 NSIC

Attendance: 1826

HOW IT HAPPENED

The night was a back-and-forth affair from the opening tip with neither team able to break into the double-digits for a lead. The game featured nine total lead changes and six ties.

After Minnesota-Duluth claimed a second-half lead, Northern's Augustin Reede hit a couple late 3-pointers to keep the Wolves within a possession. Jordan Belka also hit a 3-pointer with under a minute to go that sliced the Bulldogs' lead to just one.

Duluth's Drew Blair hit two free throws with 22 seconds remaining that pushed the lead back to three points. Northern had three cracks at game-tying shots, including a desperation three at the end that bounced away.

Northern put four players in double figures, but struggled to hit consistently from long range, going 8-for-27 (29.6 percent) from 3-point range in the game. On the whole, the Wolves were 24-for-62 (38.7 percent) from the floor.

Minnesota Duluth, coached by former NSU assistant Justin Wieck, was unable to create as many offensive chances at the basket as the host Wolves, but was just slightly more efficient with the ball, going 26-for-54 (48.1 percent) from the floor.

STATISTICAL LEADERS

Sam Masten: 16 points, 7 rebounds, 4 assists

Jordan Belka: 15 points, 8 rebounds

Augustin Reede: 12 points, 3-for-5 shooting on 3FG

Cole Bergan: 11 points, 7 rebounds, 6 assists, 2 steals, 1 block

UP NEXT

Northern will host St. Cloud State Saturday afternoon at 4 p.m.

Northern State Drops Tightly Contested Match-Up with Minnesota Duluth

Aberdeen, S.D. – The Northern State women’s basketball team dropped a close match-up with NSIC North Division foe Minnesota Duluth 66-62. Laurie Rogers (19), Rianna Fillipi (17), and Kailee Oliverson (10) led the Wolves in double-figures scoring.

THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 62, UMD 66

Records: NSU 6-5 (3-3 NSIC), UMD 7-5 (5-1 NSIC)

Attendance: 1826

HOW IT HAPPENED

Northern State jumped out to a 6-2 lead early in the game with quick baskets by Laurie Rogers, Haley Johnson, and Rianna Fillipi

Minnesota Duluth used a 10-2 run to take a 36-30 lead into the halftime break

Northern used a 10-0 run midway through the third quarter to take a two point lead, sparked by 3-pointers by Rachel Garvey and Rianna Fillipi

The Wolves held a 20-12 advantage in the third period to take a 50-48 lead entering the fourth quarter

Northern State had one final opportunity to tie the game with five seconds remaining, however Jordyn Hilgemann was called for an offensive foul before she could get the shot attempt off

Both UMD and NSU made a living in the paint during the game, but the Bulldogs out-scored the Wolves 42-40 in points in the paint during the game

NORTHERN STATE STATISTICAL STANDOUTS

Laurie Rogers: 19 points, 4 rebounds

Rianna Fillipi: 17 points, 5 rebounds, 4 assists

Kailee Oliverson: 10 points, 4 rebounds

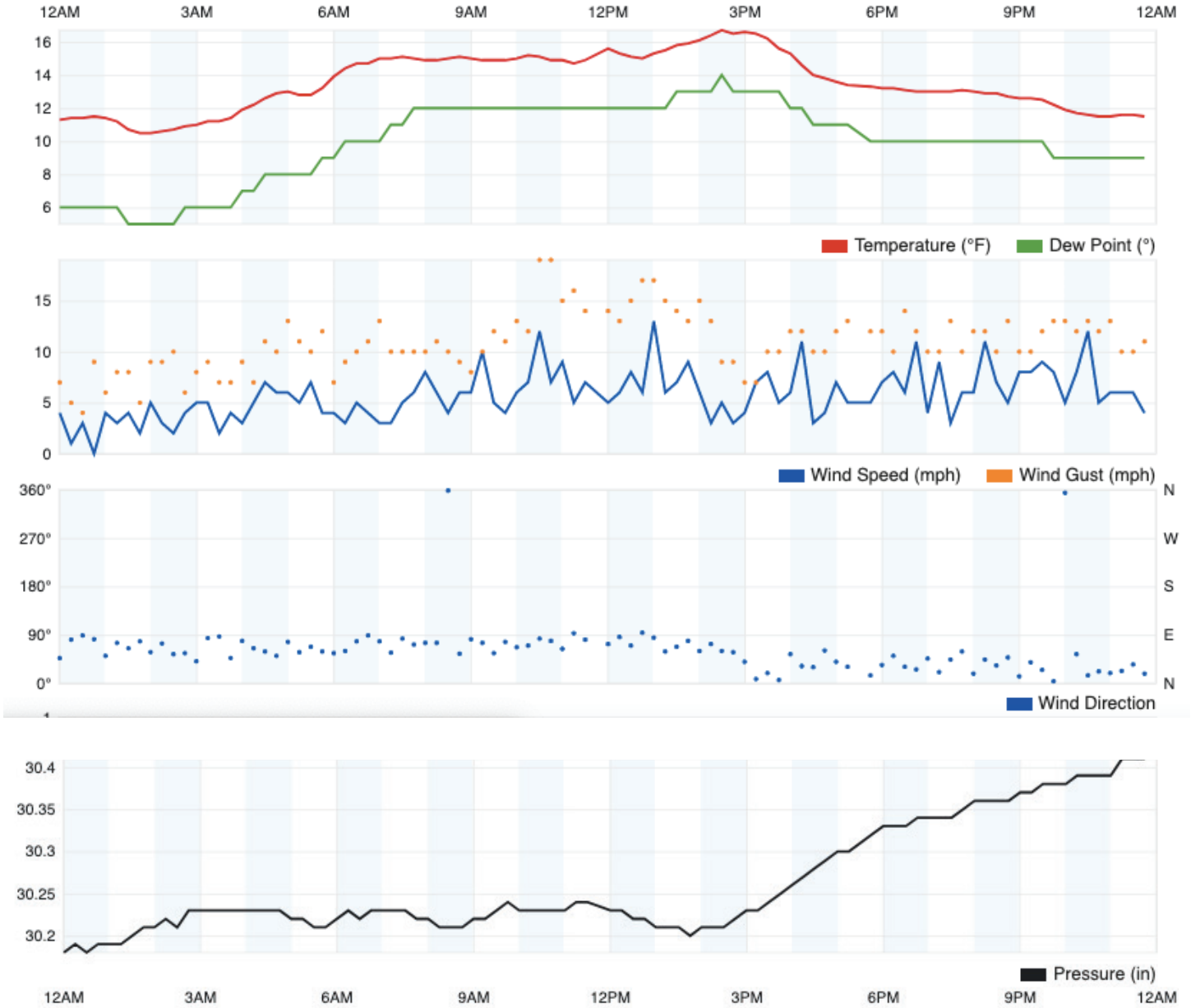
UP NEXT

Northern State women’s basketball will play one final game in Wachs Arena to close the year 2021 tomorrow. The Wolves will welcome St. Cloud State to town for a 6:00 p.m. tip-off Saturday evening.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



Chance
Flurries

High: 14 °F

Tonight



Partly Cloudy

Low: 6 °F↑

Sunday



Mostly Sunny

High: 31 °F

Sunday
Night



Mostly Cloudy


Low: 10 °F


Monday



Mostly Sunny


High: 17 °F

 NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE
OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION
Updated: 12/18/2021 5:23 AM Central



Temperature Seesaw, Mostly Dry

	Today	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday
HI:	10 to 20°	28 to 42°	15 to 25°	25 to 40°
LO:	0 to 10°	8 to 16°	0 to 12°	4 to 14°



Expect below average temperatures today with clearing skies through the day first across central and then northeastern South Dakota. Breezy conditions mainly across the Prairie Coteau may lead to some blowing snow there Sunday morning, then all areas see temperatures rise about 20 degrees warmer during the afternoon than they were today. A cold front brings colder air once again however Sunday night into Monday.

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Today in Weather History

December 18, 1985: Bitter cold impacted most places in South Dakota as low temperatures dropped 20 degrees below zero or lower. The coldest temperature was 30 below zero at Huron in Beadle County and Canton in Lincoln County. Aberdeen dropped to 22 below zero, Highmore and Mobridge fell to 23 below zero; Britton fell to 24 below zero, and Summit bottomed out at 25 below.

December 18, 1996: A powerful Alberta Clipper and a slow-moving deep Arctic high-pressure system brought widespread, prolonged blizzard conditions to the entire region from the 16th to the 19th. The clipper dropped from 1 to 5 inches of snowfall on top of the already extensive snow cover of 1 to almost 4 feet. Across central and north-central South Dakota, northerly winds increased to 25 to 40 mph with gusts to 55 mph late in the morning of the 16th. Temperatures also fell, and widespread blizzard conditions and dangerous wind chills of 40 to 70 below zero developed, prevailing through noon on the 18th. Across northeast South Dakota, conditions changed through late on the day of the 16th, with widespread blowing snow, falling temperatures, and dangerous wind chills. Blizzard conditions developed on the morning of the 17th and continued into the evening of the 18th. Conditions changed throughout the afternoon of the 16th in west-central Minnesota, with a full-fledged blizzard by the morning of the 17th.

North winds of 30 to 40 mph gusting to 50 mph brought visibilities near zero and caused heavy drifting, making travel difficult. Many people had to be rescued from their vehicles after getting stuck in massive snowdrifts or going into ditches because of low visibilities. Some people had to wait to be rescued for many hours, for some over a day. Due to the massive amount of blowing snow, widespread heavy drifting occurred across the entire area, blocking roads, making travel difficult, and leaving some people stranded to wait out the storm. Some snowdrifts from the storm were as high as 15 feet, with a few houses almost buried. A Burlington Northern locomotive became stuck in a 12-foot drift near Hazel and had to be dug out. Due to the weight of the snow, the roof of a hangar at the Gettysburg Airport collapsed on an airplane.

All schools were let out early on the 16th, with some schools not reopening until the 20th. Several school buses went into the ditch or got stuck in drifts and had to be pulled out. There were several accidents, most with minor injuries; however, one accident in Dewey County resulted in serious injury. Most of the roads, state highways and Interstate 90 were closed for a day or two until road crews could get to them. Interstate 29 also received heavy drifting, with parts of it closed for a while during the storm. Most snow plows had to be called back because they could not see the roads or the roads would be drifted over shortly after they were plowed. Some county snow removal budgets were already depleted or were close to being consumed. Emergency personnel and road crews were working extended hours to keep up with the storm. Rescue vehicles had a difficult time responding to emergencies. In one case, a lady from Mobridge had to be brought to Aberdeen. The 100-mile trip took six hours. Also, a rural Westport man died because the rescue units could not get to him in time.

Airports were closed, or flights were canceled or delayed. Mail was delayed for some people up to several days with a massive backup of Christmas packages. Some government offices and many businesses were closed for several days. All sports and other activities were postponed or canceled. Farmers and ranchers had a difficult time getting feed to their livestock. Many cattle were loose and had to be found as they walked on snowdrifts over fences. The storm also killed several animals and a countless number of pheasants with some buried in the snow. Several dairy producers had to dump thousands of pounds of milk because trucks could not get to them in time. Fortunately, there were only spotty power outages throughout the storm. For several hours on the night of the 16th in the extreme cold, 3000 people in Pierre were without power for several hours.

December 18th, 2016 An Arctic airmass over the Northern Plains produced bitterly cold temperatures. In South Dakota, both Aberdeen and Watertown broke their record low by several degrees, with both falling to 37 degrees below zero. The Arctic air combined with 10 to 20 mph winds brought wind chills to 35 to 60 degrees below zero across the region.

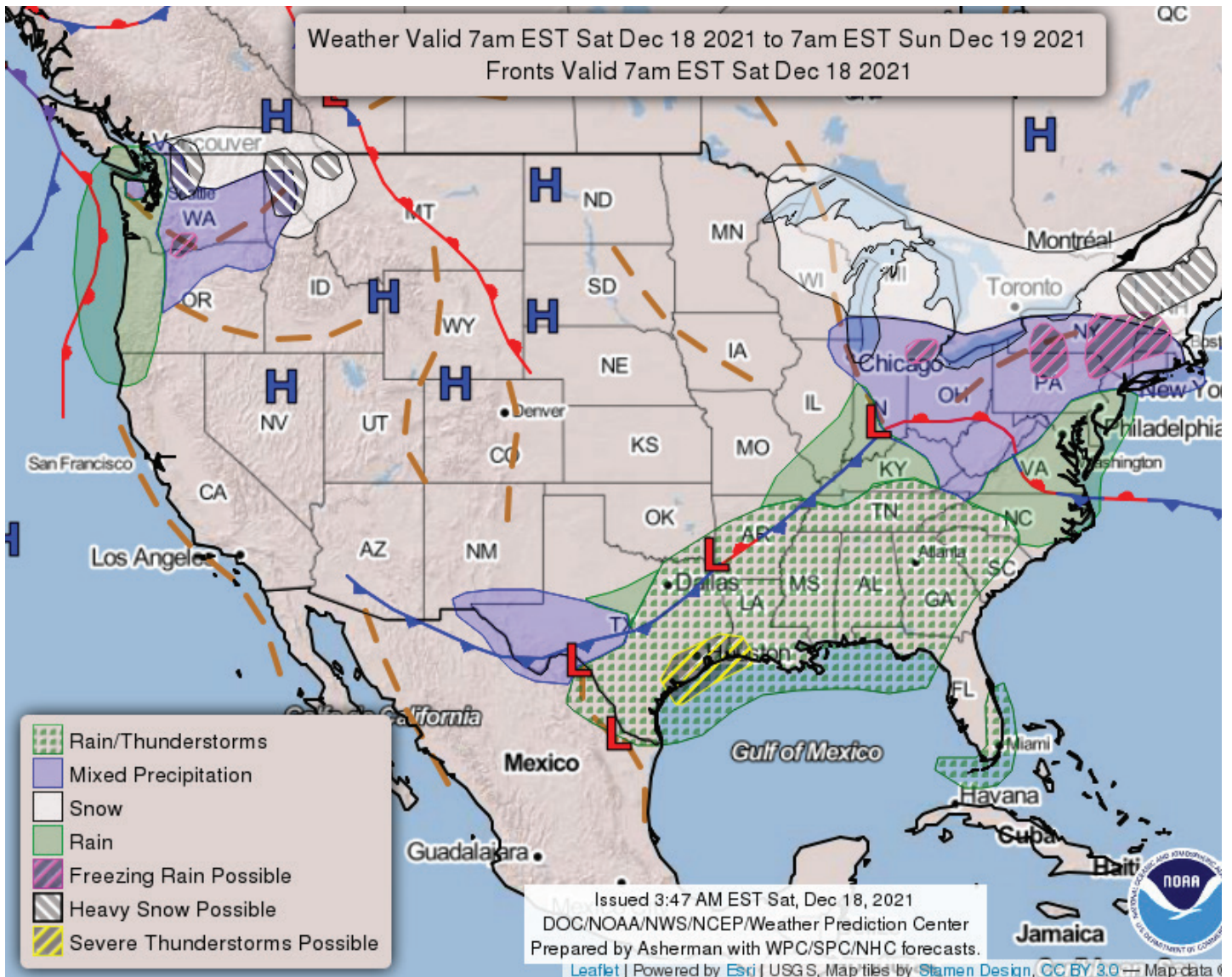
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 16.7 °F at 2:30 PM
Low Temp: 10.5 °F at 2:00 AM
Wind: 19 mph at 10:30 AM
Precip: 0.00 Snow: 7.5 inches

Record High: 58° in 1979
Record Low: -37° in 2016
Average High: 28°F
Average Low: 7°F
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.34
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.11
Average Precip to date: 21.55
Precip Year to Date: 19.97
Sunset Tonight: 4:52:28 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:06:33 AM



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NO ROOM, BUT...

The annual church Christmas program was rapidly approaching, and Mrs. Adams was assigning roles to the children in her Sunday school class. "Albert," she said, "I'd like you to be the innkeeper this year."

"No way, not me, absolutely not!" said Albert. "I'm not going to be the one who turned Mary and Joseph away from a good night's rest."

"Oh, please," she begged. "I really need you to do this. We won't be able to have the play without you," she pleaded. Finally, he agreed.

On the night of the performance, Joseph went to the door and knocked. "Who's there?" he asked.

"My name's Joseph, and Mary and I need a place to sleep," was the reply.

"I'm sorry," he said politely. "We have no rooms available." And then added kindly, "But if you'd like you can rest awhile, and I'll get you some cookies and milk."

There are many, like Albert, who would gladly give our Lord some "cookies and milk" but would never allow Him to come into their hearts and change their lives. It's enjoyable to visit the manger, sing a few carols, read the story of His birth, and then exchange gifts. But to make Him a permanent resident? Not likely!

See Him now: Patiently standing. Gently knocking. Carefully listening. Waiting hopefully. Wanting desperately to save us and give us eternal life.

Prayer: We thank You, Father, for wanting to be our Savior and to fellowship with us. Come, dwell within us and make our hearts Your home. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Revelation 3:20 Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.

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2021 Community Events

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

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The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

Subscription Form

All prices listed include 6.5% Sales Tax

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

Public-private partners build affordable Spearfish housing

By ARIELLE ZIONTS South Dakota Public Broadcasting

SPEARFISH, S.D. (AP) — Construction is underway at Sky Ridge, an affordable home development on the northern edge of the Black Hills. The Spearfish project will have 150 houses, walking trails, and softball and soccer fields.

The development reflects some current trends in South Dakota housing projects. It's the result of a public-private partnership, and it blends housing with recreation, retail and other amenities.

Workers recently drove heavy machinery and carried supplies across the site, which was lightly dusted in snow. Nearby, Spearfish city officials, developers and other workers gathered to celebrate the ground-breaking of the first home.

"We have had a lot of growth in the last several years," said City Planner Jayna Watson. "It's a very desirable place to live, meaning that just causes real estate prices to continue to increase. But the wages locally don't keep pace with the increase in housing, so we wanted to create a neighborhood that is geared specifically to affordable housing."

Sky Ridge is on the east end of Spearfish, away from the downtown and other residential areas. Spearfish is home to Black Hills State University and is known for its outdoor recreation. The city has mountain biking trails, a public campground, a creek, and serves as the gateway to Spearfish Canyon and other Northern Hills sites, South Dakota Public Broadcasting reported.

The average cost for single-family homes is \$280,000 in South Dakota and \$338,000 in Spearfish, according to Zillow.

Sky Ridge will have 60 homes that cost up to \$197,000, 60 homes that cost up to \$247,000, and 30 homes that cost up to \$300,000. Buyers will go through a pre-approval process to make sure they are in need of affordable housing and can stay on top of their bills.

A 2016 study found that Spearfish needed more affordable housing, and that the city would have to take an active role.

The city decided to use a tax increment financing district to pay for the roads, infrastructure and utilities in the Sky Ridge housing and sports development. That cuts down on costs for buyers.

The city is paying for the sports complex through fundraising and an \$8 million bond. It hired Dream Design International, a Rapid City-based company, to build the homes.

Company president Hani Shafai said Dream Design should break even or make a small profit on the project, but that's not his goal.

"You know we do a lot of work and we don't have to make money in all of the projects that we do," he said. "You have to provide housing and you have to provide jobs for the different various levels within the community. Some people have different levels of education, some people have different levels of experience. And that's what makes a community sustainable, that's what creates a healthy community."

Shafai said Dream Design is able to help with affordable housing thanks to the profits from its other projects. He said other companies can use this method, too.

The Workforce Housing Needs interim legislative committee and Gov. Kristi Noem have shown interest in such public-private partnerships.

Noem said at her budget address that she wants the state, municipalities and private companies to pitch in \$200 million each for new workforce housing.

Another private-public partnership is Liberty Plaza in Box Elder — also a Dream Design project.

Like Sky Ridge, Liberty Plaza combines housing with other attractions. Liberty Plaza will have housing, a recreation center, retail and more. In Sioux Falls, the Steel District, Burnsfield Village, Cherapa II and other projects will mix housing with restaurants, office space, hotels and other amenities.

Construction at the Sky Ridge homes in Spearfish will continue for the next five years, with the 40-acre

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sports complex expected to open in the spring of 2023.

Residents can also take advantage of a nearby gas station, convenience store and Indian restaurant. Shafai said he hopes retail shops will open on vacant land across from the development.

Luepke's 2 TDs help NDSU beat JMU 20-14 in FCS semis

FARGO, N.D. (AP) — Hunter Luepke had touchdown receptions of 32 and 22 yards to bookend the scoring and added 106 yards rushing on 17 carries to help No. 2 seed North Dakota State beat James Madison 20-14 on Friday night in the semifinals of the FCS playoffs.

North Dakota State (13-1) plays the winner between No. 8 seed Montana State and unseeded South Dakota State — which handed the Bison their only loss this season, 27-19 on Nov. 6 in Brookings, South Dakota — for the national championship in Frisco, Texas, on Jan. 8.

NDSU has won three straight, and four of its five all-time, meetings with the Dukes, all in the FCS playoffs, and is 31-1 at home in postseason — the lone loss coming against JMU, 27-17 in the 2016 semifinals. The Bison beat JMU for the 2017 and 2019 national titles, winning 17-13 and 28-20, respectively.

Miller scrambled for an 11-yard gain on third-and-12 and then lunged forward on a QB sneak to convert on fourth-and-short on a 15-play, 74-yard drive that took more than 6 minutes off the clock but ultimately ended when Jake Reinholz made a 20-yard field goal that made it 13-0 with 2 seconds left in the second quarter.

JMU's offense, which was limited to three first downs and just 71 yards in the first half, faced just one third down on an 13-play, 80-yard drive on the first possession after halftime that culminated with a 13-yard touchdown pass from Johnson to Antwane Wells Jr. with 8:51 left in the third quarter. Cole Johnson hit Devin Ravenel for a 4-yard score and JMU, which went into the game 11-0 this season when leading at the end of the third quarter, took a 14-13 lead into the fourth.

Luepke had three consecutive touches — a 34-yard reception, a 4-yard run and then a 22-yard TD catch — to give the Bison a 20-14 lead with 13:44 to play.

Johnson was 25-of-34 passing for 210 yards. The sixth-year senior, who went into the game having thrown just two interceptions this season, was picked off in the end zone by Dawson Weber early in the second quarter and Destin Talbert snatched a leaping one-handed interception in the end zone with 3:05 to play.

The Dukes (12-2) begin their transition to the FBS.

Wide receiver Christian Watson did not play for NDSU. The 6-foot-5, 208-pound senior, a projected mid-round pick in the 2022 NFL draft, missed the first two playoff games with a hamstring injury.

North Dakota State, which has won eight of the last 10 FCS national championships, limited the Dukes to their fewest points since West Virginia beat JMU 20-13 on August 31, 2019.

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>

Friday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

Aberdeen Central 50, Spearfish 37

Brandon Valley 50, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 41

Bridgewater-Emery 49, Canistota 42

Dakota Valley 57, Canton 31

Edgemont 50, Morrill, Neb. 17

Ethan 58, Freeman Academy/Marion 28

Gordon/Rushville, Neb. 53, Bennett County 41

Hanson 60, Menno 35

Hills-Beaver Creek, Minn. 61, Alcester-Hudson 42

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Howard 43, McCook Central/Montrose 29
Mott-Regent, N.D. 68, Lemmon 41
Parkston 56, Chamberlain 47
Pierre 52, Sturgis Brown 24
Platte-Geddes 43, Gregory 37
Rapid City Stevens 68, Douglas 31
Sioux Falls Christian 56, Elk Point-Jefferson 29
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 60, Sioux Falls Jefferson 27
Sully Buttes 42, Herreid/Selby Area 34
Tea Area 52, Dell Rapids 24
Tri-Valley 66, Chester 45
Viborg-Hurley 55, Irene-Wakonda 43
Wall 50, Jones County 45
Watertown 51, Huron 49
West Central 58, Winner 48
Lakota Nation Invitational=
Crow Creek 73, Wakpala 39
Lakota Tech 63, Custer 41
Lower Brule 56, Little Wound 38
McLaughlin 38, Tiospaye Topa 32
Pine Ridge 55, St. Francis Indian 41
Rapid City Christian 65, Dupree 51
Red Cloud 71, White River 53
Takini 55, Crazy Horse 24
Todd County 47, Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 41
Lakota Nations Invitational=
Omaha Nation, Neb. 50, Tiospa Zina Tribal 43
Santee, Neb. 61, Oelrichs 29
Stateline Shootout=
Belle Fourche 59, Newcastle, Wyo. 54
Sundance, Wyo. 36, Lead-Deadwood 20
POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=
Mobridge-Pollock vs. Sisseton, ppd.

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=
Aberdeen Central 74, Spearfish 49
Bon Homme 40, Scotland 36
Chester 42, Tri-Valley 36
Dakota Valley 95, Canton 69
Dell Rapids St. Mary 64, Colman-Egan 28
Dream City Christian High School, Ariz. 61, DeSmet 57
Elkton-Lake Benton 65, Lake Preston 27
Faulkton 45, Florence/Henry 41
Freeman Academy/Marion 57, Ethan 46
Gordon/Rushville, Neb. 65, Bennett County 43
Grant County/Mott-Regent Co-op, N.D. 61, Lemmon 55
Hanson 62, Menno 37
Harrisburg 69, Sioux Falls Washington 57
Huron 62, Watertown 47

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McCook Central/Montrose 57, Howard 51
Mitchell 67, Brookings 44
Morrill, Neb. 33, Edgemont 21
Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 69, Freeman 31
Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 57, Deubrook 52
Parkston 52, Chamberlain 45
Pierre 65, Sturgis Brown 19
Potter County 68, Northwestern 59
Rapid City Stevens 68, Douglas 45
Redfield 51, Aberdeen Roncalli 47
Sioux Falls Christian 66, Elk Point-Jefferson 46
Sioux Falls Lincoln 61, Yankton 44
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 67, Sioux Falls Jefferson 49
Tea Area 67, Dell Rapids 57
Viborg-Hurley 53, Irene-Wakonda 37
Wall 59, Jones County 56
Winner 67, West Central 55
Wolsey-Wessington 69, Highmore-Harrold 24
Lakota Nation Invitational=
Crazy Horse 70, Crow Creek 51
Custer 62, Todd County 59
Dupree 53, Tiospaye Topa 39
Little Wound 60, Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 46
Marty Indian 74, Wakpala 39
McLaughlin 65, St. Francis Indian 36
Tiospa Zina Tribal 69, Rapid City Christian 64
White River 63, Red Cloud 41
Lakota Nations Invitational=
Omaha Nation, Neb. 68, Pine Ridge 63
Santee, Neb. 77, Oelrichs 58
Stateline Shootout=
Belle Fourche 64, Newcastle, Wyo. 53
Sundance, Wyo. 56, Lead-Deadwood 36

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

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Mega Millions

21-32-38-48-62, Mega Ball: 10, Megaplier: 3

(twenty-one, thirty-two, thirty-eight, forty-eight, sixty-two; Mega Ball: ten; Megaplier: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$160 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$353 million

Priest convicted of stealing from churches appeals sentence

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — A former Rapid City priest convicted of stealing donations from Catholic churches is appealing his sentence.

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Marcin Garbacz's attorney told Eighth Circuit appeals court judges Thursday that the priest was ordered to pay restitution for money that wasn't necessarily stolen.

But the prosecutor, Assistant U.S. Attorney Kevin Koliner, said the priest deposited about \$260,000 in cash that couldn't be otherwise explained.

After a weeklong jury trial in early 2020, Garbacz was convicted for stealing from three Catholic churches in Rapid City over several years.

He deposited some of the money in his bank accounts and bought luxury items such as gold-plated chalices, bronze statues, a \$10,000 diamond ring and a grand piano, according to court documents.

The jury found him guilty of 50 counts of wire fraud as well as money laundering, transporting stolen money, and filing false tax returns, South Dakota Public Broadcasting reported.

Federal Judge Jeffrey Viken sentenced Garbacz to serve nearly eight years in federal prison and ordered him to make restitution of more than \$258,000, to be split equally among the three churches.

Assistant Federal Public Defender Bryan Dean said the government did not have evidence at trial that all the money Garbacz deposited was stolen. But Koliner argued Garbacz was caught on camera stealing deposit bags from one of the churches and admitted he had been stealing donations for years.

Garbacz is asking the Eighth Circuit to reverse and vacate his convictions or remand the sentence for a new restitution determination.

Rapid City schools cancel amid nationwide TikTok threats

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Public schools in Rapid City closed Friday after a social media post threatened a middle school amid nationwide TikTok posts warning of shooting and bomb threats.

The Rapid City Police Department said officers believed the threatening social media post directed at "a North Middle School" had originated in Iowa. The department said Rapid City Area Schools canceled classes "in the spirit of caution for the safety of students."

"At this time, local law enforcement has yet to find any credible or actionable threat directed at our local school system," the department said.

The social media threats had many educators on edge as they circulated in the aftermath of a deadly school shooting in Michigan, which has been followed by numerous copycat threats to schools elsewhere. School officials in states including Arizona, Connecticut, Illinois, Montana, New York and Pennsylvania said Thursday there would be an increased police presence because of the threats.

The vague, anonymous posts circulating online warned that multiple schools would receive shooting and bomb threats.

Senate confirms big slate of Biden ambassadors to end 2021

By KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate confirmed more than 30 ambassadors and other Biden administration nominees early Saturday after Majority Leader Chuck Schumer agreed to schedule a vote on sanctions on the company behind the Nord Stream 2 pipeline that will deliver natural gas from Russia to Germany.

With many senators anxious to go home for the holidays, Schumer, D-N.Y., threatened to keep the Senate in for as long as it took to break a logjam on a broad array of diplomatic and national security nominees.

Rahm Emanuel, the former mayor of Chicago, was confirmed to serve as ambassador to Japan by a vote of 48-21. Nominees to be ambassadors to Spain, Vietnam and Somalia were among those confirmed by voice vote soon afterward. The votes came after an agreement was reached to hold a vote concerning Nord Stream 2 sanctions before Jan. 14.

The confirmation process has proved to be frustrating for new presidential administrations regardless of party. While gridlock isn't new, the struggle to staff administrations is getting worse.

Democrats have increasingly voiced concerns about holds that a few GOP senators placed on nominees to raise objections about foreign policy matters that had little to do with the nominee. The holds don't

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block a nominee from being confirmed, but they do require the Senate to undertake hours of debate that could be used on other priorities. As a result, positions requiring Senate confirmation can go unfilled for several months even when the nominations are approved in committee with the support of senators from both parties.

Biden administration officials acknowledge the president will end his year with significantly more ambassadorial vacancies than recent predecessors and that the slowdown of ambassadorial and other national security picks has already had an impact on U.S. relations overseas.

Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, held up dozens of nominees at the departments of State and Treasury over objections to the administration's waiving of sanctions targeting the Nord Stream AG firm overseeing the pipeline project. The administration said at the time that it opposed the project but viewed it as a fait accompli. It also said trying to stop it would harm relations with Germany.

Critics on the both sides of the aisle have raised concerns that the pipeline will threaten European energy security by increasing the continent's reliance on Russian gas and allowing Russia to exert political pressure on vulnerable Eastern and Central European nations, particularly Ukraine.

Earlier in the week, Schumer demanded that Cruz lift all of his holds on nominees at the two Cabinet departments as well as the U.S. Agency for International Development as part of any possible agreement on a Nord Stream 2 sanctions. Cruz said he was willing to lift holds on 16 nominees. The two sides were trading offers throughout the day Friday.

"I think there ought to be a reasonable middle ground solution," Cruz said.

While Democrats were intent on making progress on Biden's nominees, they also viewed it as too little and too late.

"Let's face it. There is little to celebrate when it comes to nominations in the Senate," said Sen. Bob Menendez, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Menendez, D-N.J., blamed some Republicans for "straining the system to the breaking point" and depriving Biden of a full team of national security positions, "leaving our nation weakened."

"Something's going to happen in one of these places and we will not be there to ultimately have someone to promote our interests and to protect ourselves," he said.

But Sen. Roy Blunt, R-Mo., said that some of the gridlock on nominations stems back to four years ago when Democrats, under Schumer's leadership, tried to prevent many of President Donald Trump's nominees from being confirmed in a timely manner.

"Sen. Schumer doesn't have anything close to clean hands here," Blunt said.

Eight Republicans ended up voting with a majority of Democrats to confirm Emanuel. Three Democrats voted against his confirmation: Sens. Ed Markey and Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts, and Sen. Jeff Merkley of Oregon.

Trademark tussle: Ole Miss objects to similar New Miss logo

By EMILY WAGSTER PETTUS Associated Press

JACKSON, Miss. (AP) — James Meredith says he conquered white supremacy and created a new Mississippi 59 years ago when he became the first Black student to enroll in the University of Mississippi — a school whose longstanding nickname, Ole Miss, is rooted in plantation vernacular of the Confederacy.

Now, a person close to Meredith is selling "New Miss" merchandise and trying to trademark a logo with cursive script that is nearly identical to the university's Ole Miss logo. The university is fighting the trademark effort, arguing that the New Miss merchandise is "confusingly similar" to its ubiquitous brand.

Suzi Altman is a photographer who often follows Meredith to document his public appearances. She applied for the New Miss trademark in July 2020, soon after she sold the first T-shirts and other merchandise. Altman said she's using the brand to try to raise money for a museum that would preserve Meredith's legacy — a project that still has a long way to go. She said that as of mid-November, she still had not earned a profit on the merchandise.

Meredith was already a military veteran when he integrated the University of Mississippi in 1962 under

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a federal court order and amid resistance from a race-baiting governor. Federal marshals protected him as mob violence erupted under the oaks and magnolias on the Oxford campus.

A few years ago, one of his friends gave Meredith a baseball cap emblazoned with a logo that looked like the Ole Miss one but said "New Miss." That friend, the Rev. Robert West, said the phrase more accurately symbolized how Meredith had changed a state with a tarnished legacy of slavery and segregation.

"We were inspired by James' story," Altman told The Associated Press during a conversation about why she started selling New Miss items.

Altman's New Miss T-shirts, hats and flags use the same script as the Ole Miss logo that appears on football helmets, sports jerseys, marketing materials and all manner of merchandise licensed by the University of Mississippi. Many of her products also use the same colors as the university's: cardinal red, navy blue and powder blue.

Altman uses photos of Meredith on her New Miss Brand website. The backs of some baseball caps are embroidered with "James H. Meredith 1962."

The 88-year-old Meredith himself was elusive when asked whether he has given his blessing to Altman's business venture.

"I'm glad somebody wants to do something," he told the AP, before adding, "Everybody done made money on James Meredith except James Meredith."

Meredith is touring Mississippi on what he calls his last mission from God, urging people to abide by the Ten Commandments. Some days, he wears an Ole Miss baseball cap. Other days, he swaps that for one with a New Miss logo.

"I don't see no reason why the Ole Miss and the New Miss can't coexist," Meredith said.

The university doesn't see it that way. In a development first reported by the Clarion Ledger, the university said in its objection to Altman's trademark application that the New Miss items "are identical in some instances and confusingly similar in all instances" to Ole Miss merchandise.

In a filing Nov. 29, Altman's attorney denied that the New Miss logo is "confusingly similar" to the Ole Miss one and said that the New Miss logo is protected by the First Amendment and as a parody.

The university declined to make anyone available for an interview with the AP but said in a statement that it had tried unsuccessfully to resolve the issue with Altman.

"The University of Mississippi is affectionately known by our students, alumni and others across the country as Ole Miss, and identifies the university with the script Ole Miss logo," said the university's communications officer, Jim Zook. "The University has an obligation to protect its brand against confusingly similar marks."

The university says the Ole Miss nickname arose from a university yearbook contest in the late 1800s. The phrase "Ole Miss" had been used by enslaved people to refer to a plantation owner's wife.

The university's chancellor issued a report in 2014 on efforts to promote diversity on the mostly white campus in the state with the nation's highest percentage of Black residents. It said the university would continue calling itself Ole Miss but should consider limiting the nickname to the context of athletics and school spirit.

"Regardless of its origin, the vast majority of those associated with our university (have) a strong affection for 'Ole Miss' and do not associate its use with race in any way," the 2014 report said.

The university still uses Ole Miss for websites and email addresses, although some students and faculty object. The most popular people on campus, chosen in a student election, are Mr. and Miss Ole Miss.

Dee Rhymes, a 2021 University of Mississippi graduate, ran for Mr. Ole Miss in the fall of 2020 promising "Truth, Justice and the New Miss Way." Rhymes, who is Black, didn't win but said he wanted to inspire fellow students to think about a campus culture that could feel more equitable and compassionate. Altman has given him New Miss merchandise and he volunteers as a brand ambassador.

Rhymes said embracing New Miss over Ole Miss should not be controversial.

"New Miss is simply a new Mississippi or a new way of thinking — out with the old, in with the new," he said.

Altman said she has "no personal animosity" toward the university or the nickname Ole Miss. "I don't care if they change their name. That's not my fight," she said. "We are all about a new Mississippi and changes that cut across the state."

The University of Mississippi has worked to distance itself from Confederate imagery during the past generation.

In 1997, the university effectively stopped sports fans from bringing Confederate battle flags to games. Sports teams are still called the Rebels, but in 2003 the university retired the Col. Reb sideline mascot. During the AP interview, Meredith wore shoes with a Col. Reb logo, saying he had conquered the colonel and could wear it if he wanted.

In 2006, the university dedicated a statue of Meredith on campus and in 2020, the school moved a Confederate soldier monument that had stood for more than a century in a central part of campus to somewhere more remote. The monument had been a rallying point for rioters when Meredith enrolled.

Meredith now has two grandchildren at the University of Mississippi. He said one of his most rewarding moments on the Oxford campus happened about a dozen years ago, when he saw young Black sorority pledges "marching across Ole Miss like they own the place."

"To me, that was the new Ole Miss," Meredith said with a smile.

Follow Emily Wagster Pettus on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/EWagsterPettus>.

Tornadoes' toll: Family members mourn those they lost

By JOHN HANNA and SUDHIN THANAWALA Associated Press

Annistyn Rackley was an outgoing and energetic 9-year-old who didn't let a rare liver condition prevent her from the activities she loved: swimming, dancing and cheerleading, her great-aunt Sandra Hooker said.

The girl delighted in donning outfits and makeup for cheer competitions and would frequently do cartwheels and the splits in front of family members.

"I would just gasp because she could do the splits all the time, and she would just laugh," Hooker recalled. "She loved dancing."

Annistyn was among at least 92 people who were confirmed dead across multiple states after more than 40 tornadoes pummeled a wide area Dec. 10. The victims included grandmothers, veterans and in some cases, multiple members of a single family. On one street in Bowling Green, Kentucky, 12 people died — eight of them children. Seven of the 12 were members of one family. Their grief-stricken neighbors are surrounded by ruins that include countless children's toys.

The sudden bereavement has left loved ones reeling and clinging to memories. Katie Fields said she doesn't want her father, 60-year-old Carl Hogan, of Dawson Springs, Kentucky, remembered as "the guy who died in the tornado." Hogan loved to fish and loved his green Chevrolet truck, she said, and he was a fan of the TV show "Yellowstone." His four grandchildren "were his world," she said, and Hogan was a "fantastic" father.

"He was religious but it was a quiet, private faith," Fields said. "He was truly just a good man."

Hogan was "incredibly devoted" to his wife of 41 years, and he was looking forward to getting her back home following a stay in a hospital and nursing home that began in February, Fields said.

Elsewhere in Dawson Springs, Jason Cummins has been combing through the debris of the home his mother Marsha Hall and her sister Carole Grisham shared, keeping anything still intact — a key, a door-knob — that might remind him of them.

Hall, 72, and Grisham, 80, were referred to simply as "the sisters" around Dawson Springs, friend Jenny Beshear Sewell said. They were often in each other's company and had lived in the same home for years, according to Cummins.

"They really just took care of each other," said Cummins, 43. "It was always the two of them. They were best friends."

Cummins said he texted his aunt and mother "good morning" and told them he loved them every day.

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On the day of the storm, he added that they should “watch the weather.” He was tracking the storm on Facebook that night and told Hall to get Grisham and go to the hallway.

“She said, ‘I cleaned out the closet in case I need to get in there.’” Cummins recalled. “She said, ‘I love you.’ She texted each of my siblings and said she loved them.”

Cummins said he texted later but didn’t hear back. A tornado had wiped out the home.

Cummins said among the debris, he found his mom’s purse with cash she had taken out of the bank to hand out at Christmas.

“I don’t know how it’s going to feel the day when I don’t come up here and look for something,” he said. “That’s when I think it will hit me.”

Annistyn, her parents and her two younger sisters took shelter Friday night in a windowless bathroom in their new home west of Caruthersville, Missouri. To prove they’d gotten to the family’s “safe space,” the girls’ mom texted Hooker a photo of the three girls in and next to the bathtub — all of them smiling, Annistyn holding her favorite doll.

Fifteen minutes later, Hooker said, a tornado splintered the home, carrying the family members dozens of yards through the air into a field where first responders found them in mud. Annistyn died, and the others were injured.

Annistyn’s parents learned when she was 2 months old that she had a rare liver disorder in which bile ducts don’t develop properly, sometimes making it hard to fight off illness, according to Hooker. The two had become close over the past four years: Hooker offered the girl support during doctor’s visits and blood draws.

She called Annistyn a “special angel.”

Associated Press writer Jeffrey Collins contributed to this report.

Europeans reimpose restrictions as omicron sweeps continent

By DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Nations across Europe are moving to reimpose tougher measures to stem a new wave of COVID-19 infections spurred by the highly transmissible omicron variant, triggering calls for protests from Paris to Barcelona.

As case numbers escalated, alarmed ministers in France, and Austria tightened travel restrictions. Paris cancelled its New Year’s Eve fireworks. Denmark closed theaters, concert halls, amusement parks and museums. Ireland imposed an 8 p.m. curfew on pubs and bars and limited attendance at indoor and outdoor events.

Irish Prime Minister Micheál Martin captured the sense of the continent in an address to the nation, saying the new restrictions were needed to protect lives and livelihoods from the resurgent virus.

“None of this is easy,” Martin said Friday night. “We are all exhausted with COVID and the restrictions it requires. The twists and turns, the disappointments and the frustrations take a heavy toll on everyone. But it is the reality that we are dealing with.”

Other nations may go further still. Dutch government ministers are meeting Saturday to discuss advice from a panel of experts who are recommending a toughening of the partial lockdown that is already in place.

In the U.K., where confirmed daily infection soared to records this week, the government has already reimposed a requirement for masks to be worn indoors and ordered people to show proof of vaccination or a recent negative coronavirus test when going to night clubs and large events. Now scientists are warning that the government needs to go further to prevent hospitals from being overwhelmed.

Leaked minutes from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies suggested a ban on indoor mixing and hospitality, the BBC reported.

Britain and other nations are also accelerating the pace of booster shots after early data showed that

two doses of vaccine were less effective against the omicron variant. Shopping centers, cathedrals and soccer stadiums in Britain have been converted into mass vaccination centers.

In France, the government announced that it will start giving the vaccine to children in the 5 to 11 age group beginning Wednesday. Prime Minister Jean Castex said Friday that with the omicron variant spreading like "lightning" the government proposed requiring proof of vaccination for those entering restaurants, cafes and other public establishments. The measure is pending approval by Parliament.

Demonstrations are planned Saturday in Paris to voice opposition to the new vaccine pass and ongoing government restrictions. Protests are also scheduled to take place in Turin, Italy.

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

Pope doubles down on quashing old Latin Mass with new limits

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Pope Francis doubled down Saturday on his efforts to quash the old Latin Mass, forbidding the celebration of some sacraments according to the ancient rite in his latest salvo against conservatives and traditionalists.

The Vatican's liturgy office issued a document that clarified some questions that arose after Francis in July re-imposed restrictions on celebrating the old Latin Mass that Pope Benedict XVI had relaxed in 2007.

Francis said then that he was reversing his predecessor because Benedict's reform had become a source of division in the church and been exploited by Catholics opposed to the Second Vatican Council, the 1960s meetings that modernized the church and its liturgy.

The Vatican repeated that rationale on Saturday, saying the clarifications and new restrictions were necessary to preserve the unity of the church.

Francis' crackdown has outraged his conservative critics, many of whom have gone so far to accuse him of heresy and watering down Catholic doctrine with his focus on the environment, social justice and migrants. Francis says he preaches the Gospel and what Jesus taught.

His July law required individual bishops to approve celebrations of the old Mass, also called the Tridentine Mass, and required newly ordained priests to receive explicit permission to celebrate it from their bishops, in consultation with the Vatican. Saturday's decree makes clear the Vatican must explicitly authorize new priests to celebrate the rite.

In addition, the new document Saturday imposes restrictions targeting the sacramental life of the church.

It forbids using the ancient ritual for the sacraments of Confirmation and ordaining new priests, and will make it exceedingly difficult for traditionalists to access the sacraments of Baptism, Marriage, First Communion and Anointing of the Sick according to the old rite.

This de facto prohibition arises because these sacraments can only be celebrated in so-called personal parishes that were already in existence and dedicated to traditionalist communities. There are exceedingly few of these parishes around the world, and Francis barred the creation of new ones.

Rorate Caeli, a traditionalist blog, issued an urgent tweet after the document from the Vatican's liturgy chief, Archbishop Arthur Roche, was published.

"Roche Christmas Massacre," it said.

"Benedict XVI had brought peace to the church. An end to the liturgical wars," the group said in a follow-up message to The Associated Press. "The current pope has chosen to reignite them. There is no logical reason for that. Just an underlying desire for division and violence."

Roche, who is prefect of the Vatican's liturgy office, said the restrictions were needed to promote unity in the church and unity in the celebration of its sacraments.

"As pastors we must not lend ourselves to sterile polemics, capable only of creating division, in which the ritual itself is often exploited by ideological viewpoints," Roche wrote in the document, which Francis authorized to be published.

Saturday's document was in the form of questions and answers, including one that seeks to clarify that

the Holy See must explicitly authorize newly ordered priests to celebrate the old Latin Mass. In a clear bid to dissuade seminarians from even learning the old rite, the new instruction urges seminary teachers to lead their charges "to an understanding and experience of the richness of the liturgical reform called for by the Second Vatican Council."

Typhoon leaves 31 dead, many homes roofless in Philippines

By JIM GOMEZ Associated Press

MANILA, Philippines (AP) — A powerful typhoon left at least 31 people dead, knocked down power and communications in entire provinces and wrought widespread destruction mostly in the central Philippines, officials said Saturday. A governor said her island has been "leveled to the ground."

Typhoon Rai blew away Friday night into the South China Sea after rampaging through southern and central island provinces, where more than 300,000 people in its path were evacuated to safety in advance in a pre-emptive move officials say may have saved a lot of lives.

At its strongest, Rai packed sustained winds of 195 kilometers (121 miles) per hour and gusts of up to 270 kph (168 mph), one of the most powerful in recent years to hit the disaster-prone Southeast Asian archipelago, which lies between the Pacific Ocean and the South China Sea. The typhoon slammed into the country's southeastern coast Thursday but the extent of casualties and destruction remained unclear two days after with entire provinces still without power and cellphone connection.

The government's main disaster-response agency said at least 31 people were reported killed, many after being hit by falling trees, but it added it was validating most of the deaths. At least three were injured and one was missing.

Officials on Dinagat Islands, one of the first provinces to be lashed by the typhoon's ferocious winds, remained cut off Saturday due to downed power and communication lines. But its governor, Arlene Bag-ao, managed to post a statement on the province's website to say that the island of about 180,000 "has been leveled to the ground." She pleaded for food, water, temporary shelters, fuel, hygiene kits and medical supplies. She said only a few casualties have been reported in the capital so far because other towns remain isolated.

"We may have survived, but we cannot do the same in the coming days because of our limited capacities as an island province," Bag-ao said, adding some of Dinagat's hospitals could not open due to damage. "Most of our commercial and cargo vessels ... are now unsuitable for sea voyages, effectively cutting us off from the rest of the country."

Vice Gov. Nilo Demerey managed to reach a nearby province and told DZMM radio network that at least six residents died and that "almost 95% of houses in Dinagat have no roof," and even emergency shelters were destroyed.

"We're currently doing repairs because even our evacuation centers were destroyed. There are no shelters, the churches, gymnasium, schools, public markets and even the capitol were all shattered," Demerey said.

Pictures posted on Dinagat's website show low-slung houses with roofs either blown off or damaged and surrounded by tin roof sheets and debris. The nearby island of Siargao, known as the surfing capital of the Philippines, also was pummeled by the typhoon.

In central Bohol province, which was directly hit by the typhoon, the coast guard said its personnel on board rubber boats rescued residents who were trapped on roofs and trees, as waters rose rapidly. It released footage showing coast guard staff helping people from the roof of a house nearly engulfed by brownish floodwater to a rubber boat. They also help a villager climb down from a tree above the floodwater while another man, also wearing an orange life vest, waits for his turn.

With government contingency funds used for the coronavirus pandemic, President Rodrigo Duterte said he would look for money to help the provinces. He planned to visit the devastated region this weekend.

About 20 storms and typhoons batter the Philippines each year. The archipelago is located in the seismically active Pacific "Ring of Fire" region, making it one of the world's most disaster-prone countries.

People pressure governments worldwide to act on inflation

By JOSEPH WILSON Associated Press

BARCELONA, Spain (AP) — Óscar Baños and thousands of fellow truck drivers celebrated Saturday after a threat to idle their engines pushed the Spanish government to adopt measures improving work conditions and checking skyrocketing fuel costs driven by inflation.

It's the latest effort by workers, opposition leaders and citizens to pressure governments from Europe to the Americas to intervene as surging consumer prices squeeze households and businesses.

Baños loves hauling freight across Spain as his father did before him but was ready to lose much-needed cash during a three-day work stoppage just before Christmas. After days of negotiations, the truck companies called off the Monday-to-Wednesday action after Spain's transport ministry agreed to demands that include controls to help cushion the blow of rising diesel costs.

"I spent 1,500 euros (\$1,694) more in October for the same liters of diesel than I had the year before," the 48-year-old said recently while hauling a load of rubber. "With that cost, it is impossible."

Following the breakthrough, Baños is cautiously optimistic: The deal has "some positive things that now have to be put into practice. We will see."

Political pressure has led countries including Poland, Hungary and the U.S. to take steps such as instituting caps on gas prices, pledging money for poor households or releasing oil from strategic reserves. Spain was among places like Turkey seeing more intense efforts such as protests and work stoppages tied to complaints about inflation, which has surged as the global economy rebounded from the pandemic, increasing demand for smaller supplies of energy and snarling supply chains.

While governments are taking action, they have few effective resources to bring meaningful, lasting relief, economists say, offering short-term aid that likely will do little to combat surging prices. That's up to central banks, some of whom have started raising interest rates to ease inflation.

Spain's inflation is at a 29-year high of 5.5%, and like countries worldwide, one of the biggest drivers is energy costs: gasoline has risen 63%, while electricity for households and businesses is up 47% over the past year.

This week, dozens of trailer trucks rolled slowly through Madrid in a "slow march" protest. Many truckers feel that while they helped keep the country going when Spain entered a shutdown during the depths of the pandemic, they are being left behind by Europe's focus on a greener economy that's moving from diesel engines to electric vehicles.

The government's late Friday concessions included regulations to make a difficult job easier and attract young people: a ban on drivers loading and unloading trucks and an end to long waits at their destination. Spain also guaranteed a mandate that all trucking companies increase their tariffs in line with diesel costs so competitors don't undercut each other, eroding profits and driving some to the brink of extinction.

"This is not only about fuel prices, but they are affecting our bottom line and the economic viability of our companies," said Carmelo González, vice president of the Spanish Confederation of Freight Transport, who lead talks with the government.

"This increase of 35% in diesel fuel costs is killing us," he said.

Jaume Hugas, professor of logistics, innovation and data science at ESADE business school in Barcelona, said inflation is a common thread through protests by different sectors of Spain's economy. Strikes by metalworkers last month turned violent, and farmers have rallied against high prices.

Hugas sees the problem for Spanish truck drivers echoed in other countries like the U.S. and Britain, where a shortage of drivers meant the army had to ensure gas supplies.

"This industry has been suffering a long decline for a long time and has practically received nothing" from authorities, Hugas said. "I think that with the global collapse in trade that we have seen in Chinese ports and in the U.S., the rise in fuel prices has been the straw that broke the camel's back."

Other governments are facing pressure to act on energy prices.

With inflation at the highest level in 39 years, U.S. President Joe Biden has released 50 million barrels of oil from the U.S. strategic petroleum reserve in a bid to ease energy costs and announced a deal to make

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the Port of Los Angeles run 24/7 to ease supply backlogs. But economists say the actions are unlikely to make a big difference in surging prices anytime soon.

Hugas said the only short-term measure that produces any relief, although limited, is "removing taxes on fuel as the prices rise to stabilize them a bit."

Hungary instituted a cap on gasoline and diesel costs at the pump as prices hit record highs. It comes as the right-wing governing party faces elections in the coming months that pose the most serious challenge to its power since being elected in 2010. Some economists have called it a political decision that will provide some relief to households but could drive smaller gas stations out of business.

In Poland, the government has blamed the European Union's anti-coal climate policy for high energy prices, but the head of the International Energy Agency says a surge in demand for fossil fuels plays a bigger role. Opposition lawmaker Michal Krawczyk recently said the ruling Law and Justice Party has clung too long to coal, and "your policy, not the EU's, has led us to this."

"This year's Christmas will be the most expensive in this century," he said. Opposition leaders are pushing the government to help people in the central European country where consumer prices have surged 7.8% over the past year.

The lower house of Poland's parliament passed a measure last week promising cash allowances to the poorest families for energy bills. The aid will range from 500 to 1,250 zlotys (\$122 to \$305) per household, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said.

It's part of an anti-inflation package that also includes tax cuts on electricity, heating fuel and gas for vehicles, officials said.

"The anti-inflation shield will not answer all the problems — that is not possible — but it shows that we are doing all we can to ease this inflation pain, to reduce the costs for the Polish families," Morawiecki said.

In Brazil, where inflation has accelerated to 10.74% — its fastest pace in 18 years — and some poor people root through meat scraps for protein, its one complaint in demonstrations against President Jair Bolsonaro's government in recent months.

In response to rising prices, the country's central bank has raised interest rates, also done this week by the Bank of England and Norway's central bank.

Turkey, meanwhile, is slashing rates. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan insists high interest rates cause consumer prices to soar, contrary to conventional economic thinking. Inflation of 21% has left many struggling to buy basic goods such as food.

Thousands of people joined a rally Sunday in Istanbul to protest the soaring cost of living and demand a higher minimum wage. By Thursday, the government said it was increasing the monthly minimum by 50%, from 2,825 lira (\$171) to 4,250 lira (\$258).

"When we go to the market, we have to be selective. We buy a quarter of what we used to buy," trade union representative Ahmet Goktas, 61, said Sunday.

Hatice Sahin, 50, a municipality worker and single mother of three, said people can't make ends meet. "The food prices are exorbitant. We just cannot live," she said.

Associated Press journalists Monika Scislawska and Vanessa Gera in Warsaw, Poland; Emrah Gurel in Istanbul; Suzan Fraser in Ankara, Turkey; David Biller in Rio de Janeiro; and Frank Jordans in Berlin contributed to this report.

Typhoon leaves 19 dead, many homes roofless in Philippines

By JIM GOMEZ Associated Press

MANILA, Philippines (AP) — A powerful typhoon left at least 19 people dead, knocked down power and communications in entire provinces and wrought widespread destruction mostly in the central Philippines, officials said Saturday. A governor said her island has been "leveled to the ground."

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in a pre-emptive move officials say may have saved a lot of lives.

At its strongest, Rai packed sustained winds of 195 kilometers (121 miles) per hour and gusts of up to 270 kph (168 mph), one of the most powerful in recent years to hit the disaster-prone Southeast Asian archipelago, which lies between the Pacific Ocean and the South China Sea. The typhoon slammed into the country's southeastern coast Thursday but the extent of casualties and destruction remained unclear two days after with entire provinces still without power and cellphone connection.

The national police reported at least 19 dead but did not provide other details. The government's main disaster-response agency reported a lower death toll of 12, mostly villagers hit by falling trees, because it said it had to carefully validate each death.

Officials on Dinagat Islands, one of the first provinces to be lashed by the typhoon's ferocious winds, remained cut off Saturday due to downed power and communication lines. But its governor, Arlene Bag-ao, managed to post a statement on the province's website to say that the island of about 180,000 "has been leveled to the ground." She pleaded for food, water, temporary shelters, fuel, hygiene kits and medical supplies. She said only a few casualties have been reported in the capital so far because other towns remain isolated.

"We may have survived, but we cannot do the same in the coming days because of our limited capacities as an island province," Bag-ao said, adding some of Dinagat's hospitals could not open due to damage. "Most of our commercial and cargo vessels ... are now unsuitable for sea voyages, effectively cutting us off from the rest of the country."

Vice Gov. Nilo Demerey managed to reach a nearby province and told DZMM radio network that at least six residents died and that "almost 95% of houses in Dinagat have no roof," and even emergency shelters were destroyed.

"We're currently doing repairs because even our evacuation centers were destroyed. There are no shelters, the churches, gymnasium, schools, public markets and even the capitol were all shattered," Demerey said.

Pictures posted on Dinagat's website show low-slung houses with roofs either blown off or damaged and surrounded by tin roof sheets and debris. The nearby island of Siargao, known as the surfing capital of the Philippines, also was pummeled by the typhoon.

In central Bohol province, which was directly hit by the typhoon, the coast guard said its personnel on board rubber boats rescued residents who were trapped on roofs and trees, as waters rose rapidly. It released footage showing coast guard staff helping people from the roof of a house nearly engulfed by brownish floodwater to a rubber boat. They also help a villager climb down from a tree above the floodwater while another man, also wearing an orange life vest, waits for his turn.

With government contingency funds used for the coronavirus pandemic, President Rodrigo Duterte said he would look for money to help the provinces. He planned to visit the devastated region this weekend.

About 20 storms and typhoons batter the Philippines each year. The archipelago is located in the seismically active Pacific "Ring of Fire" region, making it one of the world's most disaster-prone countries.

Russia envoy: Moscow may up the ante if West ignores demands

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russia may take unspecified new measures to ensure its security if the U.S. and its allies continue to take provocative action and ignore Moscow's demand for guarantees precluding NATO's expansion to Ukraine, a senior diplomat said Saturday.

Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov accused Western allies of continuously pushing the envelope in relations with Russia, and warned that Moscow could also up the ante if the West doesn't treat its demands seriously.

Ryabkov's statement in an interview with the Interfax news agency came a day after Moscow submitted draft security documents demanding that NATO deny membership to Ukraine and other former Soviet countries and roll back the alliance's military deployments in Central and Eastern Europe — bold ultimatums that are almost certain to be rejected by the U.S. and its allies.

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The publication of the demands — contained in a proposed Russia-U.S. security treaty and a security agreement between Moscow and NATO — comes amid soaring tensions over a Russian troop buildup near Ukraine that has raised fears of an invasion. Russia has denied it has plans to attack its neighbor but wants legal guarantees that would rule out NATO expansion and deploying weapons there.

Russian President Vladimir Putin raised the demand for security guarantees in last week's video call with U.S. President Joe Biden. During the conversation, Biden voiced concern about a buildup of Russian troops near Ukraine and warned him that Russia would face "severe consequences" if Moscow attacked its neighbor.

"They have been extending the limits of what's possible" regarding Russia, Ryabkov told Interfax in response to a question about the Western threat of tough new sanctions against Moscow.

"But they fail to consider that we will take care of our security and act in a way similar to NATO's logic and also will start extending the limits of what is possible sooner or later," Ryabkov said. "We will find all the necessary ways, means and solutions needed to ensure our security."

He didn't elaborate on what action Russia may take if its demands are rejected by the West.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg emphasized Friday that any security talks with Moscow would need to take into account the trans-Atlantic alliance's concerns and involve Ukraine and other partners. The White House similarly said it's discussing the proposals with U.S. allies and partners, but noted that all countries have the right to determine their future without outside interference.

Ryabkov said that NATO's moves have become increasingly provocative, describing them as "balancing on the edge of war." He added that Russia now wants to hear a Western response before upping the ante.

"We don't want a conflict. We want to reach an agreement on a reasonable basis," he said. "Before making any conclusions what to do next and what steps could be taken, we need to make sure that the answer is negative. I hope that the answer will be relatively constructive and we engage in talks."

He said that the deployment of NATO's troops near Russia in the Baltic and Black Sea regions have challenged Russia's core security interests, adding that "no one should underestimate Moscow's resolve in protecting its national security interests."

Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in 2014 and shortly after cast its support behind a separatist rebellion in the country's east. More than seven years of fighting has killed over 14,000 people and devastated Ukraine's industrial heartland, known as the Donbas.

Indonesia raises Semeru volcano alert, fearing new eruption

By NINIEK KARMINI Associated Press

JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — Indonesian authorities raised the alert level for the highest volcano on Java island, saying Mount Semeru could blow up again after a sudden eruption earlier this month left 48 people dead and 36 missing in villages that were buried in layers of mud.

Indonesia's geological agency said Saturday it picked up increasing activity that could trigger an avalanche of lava and searing gas, similar to the Dec. 4 eruption, which was preceded by heavy monsoon rains that partially collapsed a lava dome on the 3,676-meter (12,060-foot) mountain.

About 8 million cubic meters (282 million cubic feet) of sand from the volcano's crater clogged the Besuk Kobokan River, which is in the path of the lava flow, Energy and Mineral Resources Minister Arifin Tasrif said.

"As a result, if there is another eruption, it would block the flow path and create new lava flows spreading to the surrounding area," Tasrif said, adding that the government had set up a new danger map and urged people to obey it. It raised the alert level to the second-highest.

The head of Indonesia's Volcanology and Geological Hazard Mitigation Center, Andiani, said villagers living on Semeru's fertile slopes are advised to stay 13 kilometers (8 miles) from the crater's mouth. She also stopped tourism and mining activities along the Besuk Kobokan watershed.

The search and rescue operations ended on Friday with 36 people still unaccounted for. More than 100 people were injured, 22 of them with serious burns. More than 5,200 houses and buildings were damaged, said National Disaster Mitigation Agency spokesperson Abdul Muhari.

After visiting the area last week, President Joko Widodo pledged to rebuild infrastructure, including the main bridge connecting the worst-hit town of Lumajang to other cities, and move about 2,970 houses out of the danger zone.

Semeru, also known as Mahameru, has erupted many times in the last 200 years. Still, as on many of the 129 volcanoes monitored in Indonesia, tens of thousands of people live on its fertile slopes. It last erupted in January, with no casualties.

Indonesia, an archipelago of more than 270 million people, is prone to earthquakes and volcanic activity because it sits along the Pacific "Ring of Fire," a horseshoe-shaped series of fault lines.

Japan police search house of man linked to deadly Osaka fire

By CHISATO TANAKA and MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

OSAKA, Japan (AP) — Japanese police on Saturday searched the house of one of the patients at a mental clinic where a fire gutted an entire floor in an eight-story building, killing 24 people trapped inside.

An Osaka police investigator told The Associated Press that the man is a possible suspect. A small fire broke out about half an hour before the building fire at the man's house, where a patient registration card was found, the investigator said.

He is believed to be among the three people who survived and were in severe condition. Police have not arrested anyone, and it may take a while until the man recovers enough to be interrogated.

According to witnesses interviewed by Japanese media, a man walked into the clinic in downtown Osaka, carrying a paper bag, which he put on the floor, right next to a heater by the reception desk, and kicked it. A liquid poured out, caught fire and the whole floor was in flames and smoke.

Witness accounts suggested that the victims gasped for air and struggled to find their way out of the clinic inside the eight-story building. There was only one way to escape because the elevator and emergency stairs were both outside the clinic, authorities say.

Police and fire officials on Saturday returned to the site in the middle of Osaka's main business section of Kitashinchi. Media reports including NHK national television said they found traces of oil that might have been used in the fire.

Some experts were surprised by the death toll in a daytime fire that was largely put out within an hour. Authorities are investigating how the smoke filled the floor so quickly and the victims became trapped. There was no prior violation of fire prevention codes at the building, officials said.

There was no emergency exit in the clinic. The office had several compartments for consultations and workshops along just one aisle, with the main counseling room on the far end of the floor.

One of the visitors who witnessed the beginning of the fire at the reception desk was able to run out. It was yet known exactly how many people were inside the clinic, the investigator said on condition of anonymity as he was not authorized to speak to the media.

Osaka residents were in shock. Some brought flowers, bottled water and canned drinks as offerings to the spirits of the departed outside the building.

A neighborhood retiree, Seki Kageyama, 77, returned to the site after finding out about the large number of dead from what he thought was a minor fire. A sign advertising the burned-out clinic on the fourth floor still stood: "Nishi Umeda clinic for the mind and body of workers."

"I thought a small fire broke out," he said. "I was really stunned when I heard that someone set a fire and killed people there."

More than 70 fire engines and ambulances took part in extinguishing the blaze Friday morning. Firefighters initially found 27 people in a state of cardiac arrest, including three who were resuscitated at hospitals, according to the Osaka city fire department.

One woman was brought down by an aerial ladder from a window on the sixth floor.

Some of the clinic's clients who spoke to Japanese media said the clinic was popular and was always crowded with up to 20 people waiting, especially on Fridays when special counselling and programs were available for those preparing to return to work after sick leave.

The clinic's psychiatrist, Kotaro Nishizawa, could not be reached since the fire.

In 2019 at the Kyoto Animation studio, an attacker stormed into the building and set it on fire, killing 36 people and injuring more than 30 others. The incident shocked Japan and drew an outpouring of grief from anime fans worldwide. In 2001, an intentionally set blaze in Tokyo's Kabukicho entertainment district killed 44 people — the country's worst known case of arson in modern times.

Yamaguchi reported from Tokyo.

Pakistan to rally Muslim countries to help Afghanistan

By KATHY GANNON Associated Press

ISLAMABAD (AP) — Pakistan is rallying Muslim countries to help Afghanistan stave off an economic and humanitarian disaster while also cajoling the neighboring country's new Taliban rulers to soften their image abroad.

Several foreign ministers from the 57-member Organization of Islamic Cooperation are meeting in Islamabad on Sunday to explore ways to aid Afghanistan while navigating the difficult political realities of its Taliban-run government, Pakistan's top diplomat said Friday.

The new Taliban administration in Kabul has been sanctioned by the international community, reeling from the collapse of the Afghan military and the Western-backed government in the face of the insurgents' takeover in mid-August.

The OIC meeting is an engagement that does not constitute an official recognition of the Taliban regime, said Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi.

He said the message to the gathering on Sunday is: "Please do not abandon Afghanistan. Please engage. We are speaking for the people of Afghanistan. We're not speaking of a particular group. We are talking about the people of Afghanistan."

Qureshi said major powers — including the United States, Russia, China and the European Union — will send their special representatives on Afghanistan to the one-day summit. Afghanistan's Taliban-appointed Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi will also attend the conference.

Afghanistan is facing a looming economic meltdown and humanitarian catastrophe in the aftermath of the Taliban takeover. Billions of dollars' worth of the country's assets abroad, mostly in the U.S., have been frozen and international funding to the country has ceased.

The world is also waiting before extending any formal recognition to the new rulers in Kabul, wary the Taliban could impose a similarly harsh regime as when they were in power 20 years ago — despite their assurances to the contrary.

In an interview with The Associated Press last week, Muttaqi said that Afghanistan's new rulers were committed to the education of girls and women in the workforce.

Yet four months into Taliban rule, girls are not allowed to attend high school in most provinces and though women have returned to their jobs in much of the health care sector, many female civil servants have been barred from coming to work.

However, security has improved under the Taliban, with aid organizations able to travel to most parts of Afghanistan, including areas that for years were off-limits during the war, said a senior humanitarian official who spoke on condition of anonymity because the official was not authorized to speak publicly on the matter.

The World Health Organization and U.N. agencies have warned of the humanitarian crisis facing Afghanistan and its 38 million people. Hospitals are desperately short of medicines, up to 95% of all households face food shortages, the poverty level is soaring toward 90% and the afghani, the national currency, is in free fall.

Pakistan has been at the forefront in pressing for world engagement in Afghanistan. Qureshi said Friday he has warned in talks with many foreign ministers — including with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken in Washington — that a total collapse in Afghanistan will hurt efforts to fight terrorism and trigger

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a massive exodus from the country.

Refugees will become economic migrants, he added, meaning they would not want to stay in neighboring countries of Pakistan and Iran, but will try to reach Europe and North America.

Qureshi also warned that if Afghans are left without help, militant groups such as al-Qaida and the regional Islamic State affiliate will regroup and flourish amid the chaos.

The OIC has leverage because of its nature as an Islamic organization and Qureshi expressed hope the summit will also be an opportunity for the world's Muslim nations to press upon the Taliban the imperative of allowing girls to attend school at all levels and for women to return to their jobs in full.

Michael Kugelman, deputy director of the Asia Program at the Washington-based Wilson center, said OIC nations could do more, suggesting they work through their religious scholars and have them interact directly with the Taliban.

For now, it would be difficult for the West to engage with the Taliban, Kugelman said, adding that such an interaction would be tantamount to admitting defeat in the 20-year war.

For the Taliban, it would be the "final satisfaction of being able to engage ... from the standpoint of victor," he said.

"The Taliban defeated the West ... their powerful militaries and caused them to suffer through a chaotic and humiliating final withdrawal," he said. "For the West to turn around and bury the hatchet with the Taliban, this would amount to a legitimization of its defeat."

Republicans resist saying 3 simple words: 'Joe Biden won'

By THOMAS BEAUMONT Associated Press

They are just three little words, but they have become nearly impossible for many Republicans to say: "Joe Biden won."

Eleven months after the Democrat's inauguration, Republican lawmakers and candidates across the country are squirming and stumbling rather than acknowledging the fact of Biden's victory in the 2020 presidential election. In debates and interviews, they offer circular statements or vague answers when asked whether they believe Biden won.

Yes or no?

In Minnesota this week, five GOP candidates for governor came up with 1,400 other words when asked by conservative radio host Hugh Hewitt for an answer.

On NBC's "Meet the Press" on Sunday, GOP Sen. Roger Marshall of Kansas would only concede: "Joe Biden was sworn into office."

The hazy statements are one measure of election denialism within the Republican Party. Former President Donald Trump's lies about a stolen election have so taken hold among GOP voters that many of the party's candidates either believe them or fear the political repercussions of refuting Trump. That sets up a surreal dynamic for next year's elections, where the toughest question posed to GOP candidates — particularly in primaries — may be one with a one-word answer that they're reluctant to give.

Biden received more than 81 million votes to Trump's 74 million, according to the tally of the Federal Election Commission. The tightest margin was in Arizona, where Biden won by 10,457 votes. More important, he won 306 votes in the Electoral College, more than the 270 required to become president. Trump got 232.

Even a GOP-led "audit" of votes in Arizona's largest county came up with a Biden win. Dozens of state and federal courts, as well as the Trump administration's Justice Department, have dismissed claims of widespread voter fraud.

When The Associated Press set out to count every fraud claim in the states disputed by Trump, it found fewer than 475 potential cases — 15 hundredths of 1% of Biden's winning margin in those states.

And yet, many Republican candidates may be eying another number: A July Associated Press-NORC Poll found 66% of Republicans said Biden was not legitimately elected president. More than two-thirds of Americans overall said Biden was legitimately elected.

The doubt has been fueled by Trump, who has argued without evidence that the election was "rigged"

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and has urged his supporters to reject the outcome. He's set out to oust fellow Republicans who voted to certify the results.

Kansas' Marshall was among five senators who voted against certifying the electoral votes for Arizona and Pennsylvania in January, the day a mob of Trump supporters stormed the U.S. Capitol in a violent effort to prevent the final step that sealed Biden's win.

While Marshall hangs his answer on process, other Republicans go further. Arizona Republican Rep. Andy Biggs, who was part of a group of GOP congressmen who pushed false claims, recently answered a question from a colleague about who won by saying flatly, "We don't know."

"There's the problem," Rep. Jamie Raskin, a Maryland Democrat, replied at a hearing of the House Oversight Committee. "Donald Trump refused to accept the results, and unfortunately we have one of the world's great political parties which has followed him off of the ledge of this electoral lunacy, and it's dangerous for democracy."

There are some Republicans who clearly, without squirming, acknowledge Biden's win. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell is among them, along with Utah Sen. Mitt Romney, who was the GOP's 2012 presidential nominee, and Nebraska Sen. Ben Sasse, for instance. Republican National Committee chairwoman Ronna McDaniel uttered the words last month.

"Painfully, Joe Biden won the election, and it's very painful to watch. He's the president. We know that," McDaniel told Washington reporters at a breakfast hosted by The Christian Science Monitor.

But it's clear not all Republicans know. In October, the second-ranking House Republican, Steve Scalise of Louisiana, repeatedly stopped short of disavowing Trump's claims of fraud, asserting without evidence that "a number" of states "didn't follow" their election laws.

On Friday, Josh Mandel, a GOP candidate for Senate in Ohio, called for more investigations into the vote in battleground states. "I think Trump won," he said in an interview on Hewitt's radio show.

"It is an important question and needs to be framed, I think, as I did. I expect it will be often asked and answered (or not) of many candidates in the year ahead," Hewitt tweeted after the Minnesota debate.

The answers demonstrate the pressure for Republican primary candidates to appeal to, or at least not offend, the vocal Trump wing of the party, strategists say.

"In today's grim Republican Party, the was-the-election-legit question has become a litmus test for whether you are truly loyal to the Republican Trumpist tribe or not," said Mike Murphy, a veteran Republican strategist and Trump critic.

It took a while — that is, winning the Republican nomination for Virginia governor — for Glenn Youngkin to get there. In May, he said in an interview, "I mean, the reality is, and I have said this before, Joe Biden was legitimately elected our president."

But in February, though he stopped short of saying Biden "stole" the election, he was equally hesitant to declare Biden had been "legitimately elected," according to the nonpartisan political watchdog group Politifact.

Other candidates have moved in the other direction — away from the facts. In Ohio, where Republicans are vying for the nomination for an open Senate seat, candidate Bernie Moreno began airing an ad this week where he is quoted as saying, "President Trump says the election was stolen, and he's right."

Yet, just days after the election last year, Moreno urged conservatives on Twitter to "accept the results of the 140+ million votes cast," and tweeted a congratulatory note to Biden for a "hard fought victory."

On Wednesday, the discomfort for Republicans played out in full view from the debate stage in suburban Minneapolis.

One-by-one, five Minnesota Republicans running for governor talked around Hewitt's question: "Did President Biden win a constitutional majority in the Electoral College?"

State Sen. Michelle Benson spilled 240 words recruiting Republican poll-watchers and blasting Minnesota's Democratic secretary of state before Hewitt bluntly asked again: "Did President Biden win?"

Her answer: "He was certified by Congress as having won the Electoral College."

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Hong Kong election defines dramatic changes by Beijing

HONG KONG (AP) — Elections for Hong Kong's Legislative Council on Sunday mark the culmination of Beijing's campaign to rein in the body that had once kept it from imposing its unrestrained will over the semi-autonomous territory.

Since the city was handed over from British to Chinese rule in 1997, with a promise by Beijing to keep Western-style freedoms for 50 years, demands for expanded democracy inspired protest movements in 2014 and 2019. But they were largely ignored and subsequently crushed by security forces.

Here's a look at the events that resulted in the dramatic changes to Hong Kong's electoral system:

THE 2014 "UMBRELLA MOVEMENT"

Also known as "Occupy Central" for the business district where pro-democracy protesters gathered, the movement got its name from the umbrellas activists used to shield themselves from police pepper spray. Nearly 1,000 people were arrested in what marked the city's most tumultuous period since China took control of the territory. A government proposal would have allowed the city's 5 million eligible voters to vote for the city's leader for the first time. But the package was rejected by pro-democracy lawmakers and activists because the power to select up to three candidates would remain in the hands of a 1,200-member group of tycoons and other elites viewed as sympathetic to the mainland Chinese government.

2019 EXTRADITION LAW PROTESTS

The government then withdrew the proposal and current Chief Executive Carrie Lam was selected by an electoral committee. In February 2019, the government introduced an extradition bill it said would plug holes in the territory's regulations on handing over criminal suspects to jurisdictions where they were wanted, including mainland China. Opponents said that put citizens at risk of being extradited on political charges to the mainland, where legal rights are considerably weaker and where they could face torture and abuse. After street marches and limited clashes between protesters and police, Lam announced she was suspending the bill on June 15, although it was not formally withdrawn until October.

GROWING PROTESTS, VIOLENT CLASHES

The movement snowballed into four demands, including an investigation into police tactics and the release of arrested demonstrators. Some also called for Lam to resign and said they want true universal suffrage. All demands were ignored. On July 1, the anniversary of Hong Kong's handover, hardcore demonstrators stormed the legislature. Hundreds of young protesters broke windows, defaced official symbols and spray painted slogans. The council was not in session and officers retreated further inside the building.

THE CRACKDOWN

As the year wore on, increasingly violent clashes erupted nightly, culminating in November in a lengthy dramatic showdown at Hong Kong Polytechnic University where students had stockpiled homemade incendiaries. Police stormed the campus, arresting more than 1,000 mostly students, and cutting off support for large protest action. Police also arrested senior opposition figures, while the pro-democracy camp won big in elections for district councilors. The movement held a symbolic primary to choose candidates for legislative elections due in September 2020 amid calls to paralyze all parliamentary activities to force concessions. Lam decided to postpone the elections, citing COVID-19 infections.

NATIONAL SECURITY LAW

Chinese officials declared conditions in Hong Kong are no longer conducive for the passage of national security legislation, and the ceremonial national parliament in Beijing will act on it instead. The National People's Congress on June 30, 2020, passed the National Security Law targeting secessionist, subversive and terrorist activities, as well as collusion with foreign forces, with penalties of up to life imprisonment. Scuffles break out in the Hong Kong legislature, where four lawmakers were disqualified under the provisions of the new law and 15 others resigned in solidarity. Six other lawmakers were expelled earlier after altering their oaths of office.

ELECTORAL CHANGES

The Chinese parliament on March 11, 2021, passes a resolution to alter Hong Kong's election law that many saw as effectively ending the "one country, two systems" framework under which Hong Kong was

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to retain its separate legal, political and financial institutions for 50 years. By a vote of 2,895-0, with one abstention, the assembly voted to give a pro-Beijing committee power to appoint more of Hong Kong's lawmakers, reducing the proportion of those directly elected, and ensure that only those truly loyal to Beijing are allowed to run for office. The move expanded the size of the chamber from 70 to 90 seats, with members of the Election Committee, a strongly pro-Beijing body responsible for electing the chief executive, making up 40 of those. Another 30 seats are elected by business groupings known as "functional constituencies." The number of directly elected representatives was reduced from 35 to 20. Five seats elected from among district councilors were abolished altogether.

ONLY PATRIOTS CAN RUN FOR OFFICE

Candidate vetting rules included in the changes ensure that anyone even suspected of being less than overwhelming loyal to Beijing will be weeded out. Hong Kong is moving toward the authoritarian Communist Party strictures in place in mainland China. The U.K. and U.S. have condemned the electoral changes while Beijing and its supporters call them mere refinements to improve efficiency. In a Dec. 7 interview with Communist Party newspaper Global Times, Lam said the elections would be "more representative with more balanced participation." She said the goal is to elect those who are patriotic to govern the city.

Court allows Biden employer vaccine mandate to take effect

By GEOFF MULVIHILL and ANDREW DeMILLO Associated Press

A federal appeals court panel on Friday allowed President Joe Biden's COVID-19 vaccine mandate for larger private employers to move ahead, reversing a previous decision on a requirement that could affect some 84 million U.S. workers.

The 2-1 decision by a panel of the 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Cincinnati overrules a decision by a federal judge in a separate court that had paused the mandate nationwide.

The mandate from the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration was to take effect Jan. 4. With Friday's ruling, it's not clear when the requirement might be put in place, but the White House said in a statement that it will protect workers: "Especially as the U.S. faces the highly transmissible Omicron variant, it's critical we move forward with vaccination requirements and protections for workers with the urgency needed in this moment."

Republican state attorneys general and conservative groups said they would appeal Friday's decision to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Twenty-seven Republican-led states joined with conservative groups, business associations and some individual businesses to push back against the requirement as soon as OSHA published the rules in early November. They argued the agency was not authorized to make the emergency rule, in part because the coronavirus is a general health risk and not one faced only by employees at work.

The panel's majority disagreed.

"Given OSHA's clear and exercised authority to regulate viruses, OSHA necessarily has the authority to regulate infectious diseases that are not unique to the workplace," Judge Julia Smith Gibbons, who was nominated to the court by former President George W. Bush, a Republican, wrote in her majority opinion.

"Vaccination and medical examinations are both tools that OSHA historically employed to contain illness in the workplace," she wrote.

Gibbons noted that the agency's authority extends beyond just regulating "hard hats and safety goggles." She said the vaccine requirement "is not a novel expansion of OSHA's power; it is an existing application of authority to a novel and dangerous worldwide pandemic."

She was joined in the majority decision by Judge Jane Branstetter Stranch, an appointee of former President Barack Obama, a Democrat.

The case was consolidated in the 6th circuit, which is dominated by Republican-appointed judges. Earlier this week, the circuit's active judges rejected a move to have the entire panel consider the case, on an 8-8 vote.

The dissent in Friday's ruling came from Judge Joan Larsen, an appointee of former President Donald

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Trump, who said Congress did not authorize OSHA to make this sort of rule and that it did not qualify as a necessity to use the emergency procedures the agency followed to put it in place.

Larsen also argued that vaccinated workers "do not face 'grave danger' from working with those who are not vaccinated."

Arkansas Attorney General Leslie Rutledge, a Republican, said she would ask the U.S. Supreme Court to block the order. At least two conservative advocacy groups said they had already appealed to the nation's highest court.

"The Sixth Circuit's decision is extremely disappointing for Arkansans because it will force them to get the shot or lose their jobs," Rutledge said.

South Carolina Attorney General Alan Wilson, who also is chairman of the Republican Attorneys General Association, said in a Twitter message Friday that he was confident the mandate could be stopped.

The vaccine requirement would apply to companies with 100 or more employees and would cover about 84 million workers in the U.S. Employees who are not fully vaccinated would have to wear face masks and be subject to weekly COVID-19 tests. There would be exceptions, including for those who work outdoors or only at home.

The administration has estimated that the rule would save 6,500 lives and prevent 250,000 hospitalizations over six months. On Friday, the U.S. Department of Labor, which includes OSHA, said the 6th circuit's ruling will allow the agency to implement "common-sense, science-based measures to keep workers safe and healthy during a deadly pandemic."

The vaccine rule for private employers is separate from other vaccine mandates announced by the Biden administration that apply to federal government contractors and workers in health care facilities that receive funding from Medicaid or Medicare. Those rules also are under assault from conservatives and have been paused in at least some parts of the country.

Mulvihill reported from Cherry Hill, New Jersey, and DeMillo from Little Rock, Arkansas.

Kim Potter on Daunte Wright death: 'I'm sorry it happened'

By AMY FORLITI and SCOTT BAUER Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — The Minnesota police officer who shot and killed Daunte Wright told jurors at her manslaughter trial on Friday that she "didn't want to hurt anybody" that day, saying during sometimes tearful testimony that she shouted a warning about using her Taser on Wright after she saw fear in a fellow officer's face.

Kim Potter, 49, has said she meant to draw her Taser instead of her handgun during the April 11 traffic stop in Brooklyn Center when she killed Wright. She testified that she was "sorry it happened" and that she doesn't remember what she said or everything that happened after the shooting, saying much of her memory of those moments "is missing."

Potter is charged with first-degree and second-degree manslaughter in the killing of Wright, a 20-year-old Black motorist who was pulled over for having expired license plate tags and an air freshener hanging from his rearview mirror. Potter, who was training another officer at the time, said she probably wouldn't have pulled Wright's car over if she had been on her own that day because many drivers were late on renewing their tags at that point of the pandemic.

After she and the other two officers at the scene that day decided to arrest Wright on an outstanding warrant for a weapons violation, the encounter "just went chaotic," Potter told the jury. Wright pulled away from the officers and got back in his car, police body camera footage of the traffic stop shows.

"I remember yelling, 'Taser, Taser, Taser,' and nothing happened, and then he told me I shot him," Potter said through tears. Her body camera video recorded Wright saying, "Ah, he shot me" an instant after the shooting.

Potter's attorneys argued that she made a mistake but also would have been justified in using deadly force if she had meant to because one of the other officers, then-Sgt. Mychal Johnson, was at risk of be-

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ing dragged by Wright's car.

Johnson testified last week that he was leaning into the car to make sure the gear shifter was in park and to shut off the vehicle, and that he had grabbed Wright's right arm with both hands to try to handcuff him. He said at the time he couldn't see what Potter was doing, but began backing out when he heard Potter shout, "Taser!"

Composite video appeared to show Johnson's hands still in the car at the time the shot was fired.

Potter said nothing in court about making a mistake, and she seemed to give a chronology of what happened without providing insight into what she was thinking.

During cross-examination, prosecutor Erin Eldridge noted that Potter testified that she decided to draw her Taser after she saw Johnson looked scared. Potter agreed that was her testimony. But Eldridge said Potter told a defense expert that she didn't know why she drew her Taser. Quoting from the expert's report, Eldridge said that Potter said: "I don't have an answer, my brain said grab the Taser." Potter told the court she didn't recall saying that.

Eldridge also got Potter to say that she didn't plan to use deadly force.

Eldridge drove hard at Potter's training, getting her to agree that her use-of-force training was a "key component" to being an officer. Potter testified that she was also trained on when to use force and how much to use, and that there was a policy that dictated what officers could or could not do.

Potter testified under questioning by one of her lawyers that she had no training on "weapons confusion," saying it was mentioned in training but wasn't something her department's officers were physically trained on. She also said she never used a Taser while on duty during her 26 years on the force, though she had pulled it out a few times to de-escalate situations, and that she never used her gun until the day she shot Wright.

Potter, who was training Officer Anthony Luckey, said Luckey noticed Wright's car in a turn lane with the signal turned on inappropriately, then saw an air freshener hanging from the rearview mirror as well as expired tags.

She said Luckey wanted to stop the vehicle, and although she "most likely" wouldn't have done so if she'd been on patrol by herself, it is important for trainees to have many encounters with the public. She said after they found there was a warrant for Wright's arrest, they were required to take him into custody.

She said they also were required to find out who Wright's female passenger was because a woman — a different one, as it turned out — had taken out a restraining order against him.

While defense attorney Earl Gray walked her through what happened, he did not ask her whether she meant to draw her Taser. A prosecution witness testified earlier in the week that she would not have decided to use her Taser if she thought there was a danger it could cause a death or great bodily harm.

Potter, who resigned two days after the shooting, was matter-of-fact and gave brief answers for most of the cross-examination.

Under questioning by her own attorney, Potter said she has been in therapy since the shooting, and that she left Minnesota and is no longer a police officer. She said she quit the police force because "there was so much bad things happening. ... I didn't want anything bad to happen to the city."

Wright's death set off angry demonstrations for several days in Brooklyn Center. It happened as another white officer, Derek Chauvin, was standing trial in nearby Minneapolis for the killing of George Floyd.

Before Potter took the stand, a defense witness testified that police officers can mistakenly draw their guns instead of Tasers under high-stress situations because their ingrained training takes over.

Laurence Miller, a psychologist who teaches at Florida Atlantic University, said that the more someone repeats the same act, the less they have to think about it. Miller said that when a person learns a new skill, memory of an old skill might override that, resulting in an "action error" in which an intended action has an unintended effect.

"You intend to do one thing, think you're doing that thing, but do something else and only realize later that the action that you intended was not the one you took," he said.

Some experts are skeptical of the theory. Geoffrey Alpert, a criminology professor at the University of

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South Carolina who is not involved in Potter's trial, has said there's no science behind it.

On cross-examination, Eldridge quoted from a 2010 article Miller wrote in which he described how police can avoid what he termed "one big mistake." He wrote that many such mistakes are preventable through proper training and practice.

State sentencing guidelines call for just over seven years in prison upon conviction of first-degree manslaughter and four years for second-degree, though prosecutors have said they plan to push for longer sentences.

Both sides will present closing arguments Monday before the case goes to the mostly white jury.

Bauer reported from Madison, Wisconsin. Associated Press writers Tammy Webber in Fenton, Michigan, and Steve Karnowski in Minneapolis also contributed.

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

FACT FOCUS: Masks help curb spread of COVID-19 on planes

By JOSH KELETY and ANGELO FICHERA Associated Press

The CEO of a major airline suggested during a congressional hearing this week that face masks provide little value on planes — a claim that was quickly amplified online.

Citing high-quality filtration systems aboard planes, Southwest Airlines CEO Gary Kelly stated that "masks don't add much, if anything, in the air cabin environment."

But experts strongly disagree. Here are the facts.

CLAIM: Mask-wearing on planes is unnecessary because advanced air filtration systems sufficiently reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission.

THE FACTS: While it's true that the common air filtration and distribution systems used in modern aircraft are highly effective at reducing the risk of COVID-19 transmission among passengers, masks add another layer of protection for air travelers, experts told The Associated Press.

Kelly's comments came during a Wednesday hearing before the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation. After returning home from the hearing, Kelly tested positive for COVID-19, a Southwest spokesperson confirmed to the AP on Friday.

Kelly made his comment about masks in response to a question from Sen. Roger Wicker, a Republican representing Mississippi, who asked Kelly and another airline CEO if they thought air travel without masks could ever resume.

Kelly said that "99.97% of airborne pathogens are captured" by high efficiency particulate air filters, or HEPA filters, on airplanes, before suggesting that masks are unnecessary during air travel.

"Yeah, I think the case is very strong that masks don't add much, if anything, in the air cabin environment," Kelly said. "It's very safe, and very high quality compared to any other indoor setting."

American Airlines CEO Doug Parker appeared to agree, saying, "I concur, the aircraft is the safest place you can be." He noted that all of his company's aircraft have the same HEPA filters.

The comments were quickly picked up by news outlets and blogs, and spread on social media.

"The CEOs of Southwest and American Airlines both said today in Senate testimony that masks on planes serve no purpose," said one tweet shared more than 3,500 times.

Both CEOs clarified their comments to say they support the current federal policy requiring masks on flights. On Friday, after returning home from the hearing, Kelly tested positive for COVID-19, Southwest spokesperson confirmed to the AP.

Southwest Airlines provided the AP with a message that Kelly sent to employees in which the CEO apologized for any "confusion" stemming from the hearing, saying Southwest continued to "support the current federal mask mandate at airports and on airplanes."

Kelly said the airline adopted a mask requirement aboard its flights in May 2020, before the federal government required it, and that employees and customers "have felt it has been an important layer of protection, and I certainly agree with that." He said the airline would "continue to rely on the advice of

our medical experts regarding the necessity of masks.”

Parker later said on social media he “agreed with my fellow CEOs that being onboard a plane is proven to be a safe and healthy indoor environment.” But he said that his statement at the hearing was unclear and that he supported the federal mask mandate “Full stop.”

While HEPA filtration systems are highly effective at reducing the transmission of viruses, they do not completely eliminate risk aboard flights, according to Linsey Marr, an aerosol scientist at Virginia Tech.

“The issue is that they only work on the air as it passes through the filter,” she said in an email. “If you are sitting near someone who is releasing lots of viruses into the air, you could end up inhaling them before they have had a chance to pass through the filtration system.”

Marr said it takes a few minutes for air to completely pass through the filtration system. She said requiring everyone to wear a mask reduces the amount of virus an infected individual can release into the air, and helps reduce the amount of virus someone wearing a mask might breathe in.

Leonard J. Marcus, director of the Aviation Public Health Initiative at Harvard University, agreed.

“Yes, the ventilation system on airplanes are incredible. They’re comparable with what you might find in an operating room,” he said. But “it is the multiple layers, it’s not one thing alone.”

Marcus said that masks are particularly important when people are boarding and exiting airplanes or moving around the aircraft cabin. Rising COVID-19 cases and the threat posed by the omicron variant also make mask-wearing on planes essential, he said.

“People are moving about, people are turning to speak to someone, people are sometimes lifting up their mask to drink,” said Marcus, whose initiative published a report in October that supported a “layered” approach to lowering risk. “If everyone is wearing the mask, there’s going to be much less transmission of the disease.”

The Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, AFL-CIO, a union representing some 50,000 flight attendants, has also called masks a “key component” of safety on flights, noting that not all planes have HEPA filtration systems.

Kelety reported from Phoenix; Fichera from Philadelphia.

This is part of AP’s effort to address widely shared misinformation, including work with outside companies and organizations to add factual context to misleading content that is circulating online. Learn more about fact-checking at AP.

Elizabeth Holmes’ fraud case heads to the jury

By MICHAEL LIEDTKE AP Technology Writer

SAN JOSE, Calif. (AP) — The jury that will weigh 11 charges of fraud and conspiracy against former Theranos CEO Elizabeth Holmes finally got the case Friday afternoon after a three-month trial that captivated Silicon Valley.

The hand-off came after lawyers for the opposing sides wrapped up a second day of painstaking final arguments to sum up their respective interpretations of the evidence submitted to the jury. That included the testimony of 32 witnesses — including Holmes herself — and more than 900 exhibits.

The eight men and four women on the jury began their deliberations late on Friday and will take the weekend off before resuming Monday morning to decide whether Holmes turned her blood-testing startup into a massive scam. If convicted on all counts, Holmes, 37, could face up to 20 years in prison.

In his final attempt to persuade the jury to acquit, Holmes lawyer Kevin Downey likened her final days running a then-reeling Theranos to a captain valiantly trying to save a sinking ship.

Had Holmes committed any crimes, she would have been scurrying to jump overboard like a scared rat, Downey, told jurors as he wrapped up roughly five hours of closing arguments. Federal prosecutors spent three hours Thursday explaining why the jury should convict her.

Referring to a 2016 turning point that threatened to ruin Theranos, Downey asked the jury: “Did she leave? No she stayed. Why? Because she believed in this technology.”

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As he did Thursday, Downey again depicted Holmes as a well-meaning entrepreneur who never stopped trying to perfect Theranos' blood-testing technology and use it to improve health care.

"She believed she was building a technology that would change the world," Downey proclaimed Friday.

Federal prosecutor John Bostic offered a rebuttal, arguing that Holmes made her attempts to salvage Theranos under intense scrutiny that gave her few other options. He cited evidence to argue that she consistently sought to deceive people whenever she thought she could get away with her alleged ruse.

"At so many forks in the road, she chose the wrong path," Bostic said.

Bostic's rebuttal echoed many of the themes touched upon in Thursday's arguments, when fellow prosecutor Jeffrey Schenk cast Holmes as a charlatan who brazenly lied to become rich and famous. Those purported goals were achieved in 2014 when Holmes became a media sensation with an estimated fortune of \$4.5 billion based on her 50% stake in Theranos.

The trial revolves around allegations that Holmes duped investors, business partners and patients about Theranos' technology. She repeatedly claimed that the company's new testing device could scan for hundreds of diseases and other problems with a few drops of blood taken with a finger prick instead of a needle stuck in a vein.

The concept was so compelling that Theranos and Holmes were able to raise more than \$900 million, some of that from billionaire investors such as media magnate Rupert Murdoch and software titan Larry Ellison. The Palo Alto, California, company also negotiated potentially lucrative deals with major retailers Walgreens and Safeway. Holmes soon began to grace national magazine covers as a wunderkind.

Unknown to most people outside Theranos, the company's blood-testing technology was flawed, often producing inaccurate results that could have endangered the lives of patients who took the tests.

After the flaws were exposed in 2015 and 2016, Theranos eventually collapsed. The Justice Department filed its criminal case in 2018.

"People lost money," Downey acknowledged Friday. "That is a bad event and a failure on (Holmes') part." But, he added, none of it was criminal.

Downey told the jury that Holmes didn't realize the scope of the problems until a Theranos laboratory director informed her in March 2016 that the company had to invalidate 60,000 of its past blood tests.

Had Holmes thought any crimes been committed, Downey posited, she would have tried to cover them up and perhaps sell some of her stock. Not only did she never sell a share, Downey said, she continued to try to salvage the company. Her turnaround efforts included ousting Theranos' chief operating officer, Sunny Balwani, who also had been her lover.

In a dramatic turn on the witness stand last month, Holmes testified that Balwani had been covertly controlling her diet, her friendships and more while subjecting her to mental, emotional and sexual abuse. Although the testimony cast Holmes as Balwani's pawn, Downey never mentioned the alleged abuse and its effects on Holmes during his closing arguments.

The jury has been left to consider whether partner abuse may have affected some of her decisions at Theranos. In the prosecution's closing argument, Schenk reminded the jurors that finding Holmes guilty of fraud won't mean they discounted her abuse allegations.

Bostic revisited the issue Friday, telling the jurors they shouldn't allow sympathy to sway their decision on the fraud charges. "There is an extensive record for the charges of fraud in this case," he said. "There is much less evidence of what happened between Miss Holmes and Mr. Balwani."

Balwani's lawyer adamantly denied Holmes' accusations in court documents that the jury never saw. Jurors also never heard from Balwani, who intended to invoke his Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination had been called to testify. Balwani, 56, faces similar fraud charges in a separate trial scheduled to begin in February.

Rockettes end season as New York tallies record COVID cases

By The Associated Press undefined

NEW YORK (AP) — New York state reported Friday that just over 21,000 people had tested positive for

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COVID-19 the previous day, the highest single-day total for new cases since testing became widely available.

Just under half of the positive results were in the city, where lines were growing at testing stations, the Rockettes Christmas show was canceled for the season and some Broadway shows nixed performances because of outbreaks among cast members.

One-day snapshots of virus statistics can be an unreliable way to measure trends, but the new record punctuated a steady increase that started in the western part of the state in late October, and has taken off in New York City in the past week as the omicron variant spreads.

"This is changing so quickly. The numbers are going up exponentially by day," Gov. Kathy Hochul said during a Friday appearance on CNN.

The steep rise in infections should be of great concern but it was inevitable, given the quick spread of the newest variant, said Dr. Denis Nash, the executive director of the Institute for Implementation Science in Population Health at the City University of New York.

"We were already headed for a winter surge with delta, which is a very concerning thing in its own right," Nash said.

"But then you layer on top of that the new omicron variant, which is more transmissible from an infection standpoint," he said, noting that current vaccines may be unable to contain the "more invasive" new variant.

Statewide, New York averaged 13,257 positive tests per day over the seven-day period that ended Thursday. That is up 71% from two weeks ago.

The state's previous one-day high for positive tests came on Jan. 14, 2021, when just under 20,000 people tested positive.

New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio has warned that omicron is in "full force," but said the city's hospitals are "very strong and stable right now" and far better able to handle COVID-19 than when the pandemic began. Treatments have improved, and more than 70% of eligible city residents are fully vaccinated, he noted.

Surging COVID-19 cases bring a 2020 feel to the end of 2021

BY JENNIFER PELTZ and BOBBY CAINA CALVAN Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — U.S. officials intensified calls Friday for unvaccinated Americans to get inoculated in the face of the new omicron variant that contributed to a record number of infections in New York and threatened to wipe out a second holiday season in Europe.

Though the calendar is about to change, Friday had a distinctly 2020 feel: NFL games were postponed because of COVID-19 infections. The Rockettes Christmas show was canceled for the season. European governments imposed a spate of restrictions that ground travel to a halt and saw travelers lying low.

Much remains unknown about omicron, but officials warn that it appears more transmissible than the delta variant, which has already put pressure on hospitals worldwide. The uncertainty alone was enough for many people to change their plans.

In the United States, President Joe Biden's administration resisted tightening any restrictions, but also sketched out dire scenarios for the unvaccinated in a plea for hesitant Americans to get the shot.

"For the unvaccinated, you're looking at a winter of severe illness and death, for yourselves, your families, and the hospitals you may soon overwhelm," White House coronavirus response coordinator Jeff Zients said Friday, echoing the president's own comments earlier this week.

The new variant is already in "full force" in New York City, Mayor Bill de Blasio said, with new cases hitting a one-day record of more than 8,300 on Thursday. But new hospitalizations and deaths — so far — are well below their spring 2020 peak and even where they were this time last year, city data shows.

The coronavirus also interrupted sports in the U.S. again. The NFL announced Friday that three games would be pushed from the weekend to next week because of outbreaks. The league has not specified whether the cases came from the omicron variant.

The Radio City Rockettes called off four performances scheduled for Friday because of breakthrough COVID-19 cases in the production, and plans for upcoming shows were still being assessed. The popular

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holiday program generally has four shows per day in December at Radio City Music Hall in Manhattan.

Dr. Stanley Weiss, a Rutgers University epidemiology professor, said officials need to react faster, citing a willingness to redefine fully vaccinated to include booster shots, for example.

"Everyone wants us to be through with this pandemic, but in order to get us through it, we can't ignore the realities of what's going on and what is needed," Weiss said.

Denmark decided to close theaters, concert halls, amusement parks and museums in response to virus cases. In Spain, friends and classmates canceled traditional year-end dinners.

Scotland and Wales on Friday pledged millions of pounds for businesses hurt in Britain's latest infection surge, a move that heaped pressure on Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government to do the same in England.

Treasury chief Rishi Sunak held talks with business representatives who have demanded more support, decrying a "lockdown by stealth" in which government officials recommend people cut back on socializing as much as possible without officially imposing the strict rules of past shutdowns.

Britain reported record numbers of infections three days in a row this week, the latest on Friday with more than 93,000 cases tallied.

Businesses ranging from vacation providers to pubs and theaters saw a wave of cancellations as customers decided to skip merrymaking for now rather than risk being infected and missing family celebrations later.

Even Britain's Christmas pantos — beloved and raucous holiday performances — are under threat. The Belgrade Theatre in Coventry in western England had to refund 180,000 pounds (\$240,000) in ticket sales after customers decided not to go to shows. It was also forced to cancel 12 performances of "Beauty and the Beast" because half the cast tested positive.

"There's been a real dent of confidence," Executive Director Joanna Reid told the BBC.

Scotland's first minister, Nicola Sturgeon, said Friday that financial assistance for business must come from the central government because it has the borrowing power to finance the scale of aid that is needed.

"Business is already bleeding, every 24 hours counts," Sturgeon said during a briefing in Edinburgh, Scotland's capital. "There is no time to waste."

The already beleaguered travel and tourism industry is being particularly hammered.

Eurostar, which operates trains across the English Channel, sold out of tickets to France on Friday before new rules restricting travel to and from Britain took effect. Long lines snaked around the parking lot at the Eurotunnel, which runs the tunnel that drivers use to cross the water.

Ryanair originally expected to carry about 11 million passengers in December, but that figure dropped to 10 million, chief executive Michael O'Leary told the Guardian. Europe's biggest airline will also cut about 10% of its capacity in January.

Amanda Wheelock, 29, a graduate student at the University of Michigan, canceled a trip to France with her partner as cases spiked there. Even though the surge isn't necessarily due to omicron, the uncertainty about the new variant, and a new requirement that all U.S. travelers have to test negative before flying back to the U.S., made her worry that the trip would be more stressful than fun.

Instead, she's traveling to the Anchorage, Alaska, area to see friends.

"A vacation with a lot of stress is probably not a great vacation," said Wheelock, who is from Arvada, Colorado.

The Advantage Travel Group, which represents about 350 U.K. travel agents, said business fell by 40% in mid-December from a month earlier. Those numbers, including flights, cruise bookings and package holidays, add to the travel industry's existing slump, which had already seen business fall by two-thirds since the pandemic began, CEO Julia Lo Bue-Said.

"Our members are dealing with customers who are really nervous about traveling now," she said "They're really nervous about bookings for the New Year because they fear that there's a risk that the government will make more knee-jerk reactions."

Many in the travel and hospitality trades hoped they had put the worst behind them, nearly two years into a pandemic that has devastated those industries. They saw this holiday season as a chance to claw

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back some of what was lost — until omicron cast a pall reminiscent of the early days of the crisis.

Richard Stevens estimates he has lost out on 4,000 pounds (\$5,300) worth of bookings at his rental ski chalet in the French Alps after the new, stricter travel rules for people coming from Britain were announced.

He lost his first reservation when a guest called to say that the restrictions won't allow anybody to come to France without a compelling reason, Stevens said. "And the compelling reason doesn't include going on holiday."

Celebrity chef Michel Roux and other restaurateurs have invested heavily to remake their venues to address safety concerns — and hoped to reap some of the benefits.

To return to a state of huge uncertainty for a second consecutive Christmas is "like a kick in the stomach," said Roux, who has a destination restaurant in London.

Jorge Riera, who manages a traditional Spanish diner in central Madrid, said it doesn't matter that authorities have not imposed specific restrictions and, at most, have only issued recommendations.

"Most of our customers prioritize the well-being of their relatives over going out for a fun night with colleagues," Riera said.

In the past week alone, cancellations rolled in for about half of the booked space, sometimes on the same day of the event, the manager said.

"People are once again afraid of the virus," he said.

Associated Press writers Kelvin Chan and Danica Kirka in London; Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar in Washington, Mae Anderson in New York, Aritz Parra in Madrid, Barry Hatton in Lisbon and Sylvia Hui in London contributed to this report.

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

Ex-hostages doing well, have left Haiti, mission agency says

By PETER SMITH and CHRISTOPHER SHERMAN Associated Press

All the former hostages from a U.S.-based missionary group kidnapped in Haiti have been flown out of the country after a two-month ordeal, the leader of their Ohio-based missions organization said Friday, as he also extended an offer of forgiveness to their captors.

David Troyer, general director of Christian Aid Ministries, said in a video statement that a U.S.-flagged plane left the Caribbean nation Thursday afternoon carrying the last 12 kidnapped missionaries, hours after they were freed earlier in the day.

"Everyone including the 10-month-old baby, the 3-year-old boy and the 6-year-old boy seem to be doing reasonably well," Troyer said.

The last releases came two months to the day after the group of 16 Americans and one Canadian — including five children — were kidnapped by the 400 Mawozo gang, which initially demanded millions of dollars in ransom. The other five had been freed earlier.

Troyer did not comment on the circumstances of the release, such as whether ransom was paid or a rescue effort was involved, but expressed thanks to "the U.S. government and all others who assisted in the safe return of our hostages."

"Thank you for understanding our desire to pursue nonviolent approaches," he added, without elaboration.

Based in Berlin, Ohio, Christian Aid Ministries, or CAM, is supported and staffed by conservative Anabaptists, a range of Mennonite, Amish and related groups whose hallmarks include nonresistance to evil, plain dress and separation from mainstream society.

In keeping with Anabaptist teaching, which puts a premium on forgiveness, Troyer offered conciliatory words to the captors.

"A word to the kidnappers: We do not know all of the challenges you face. We do believe that violence and oppression of others can never be justified. You caused our hostages and their families a lot of suffering," he said. "However, Jesus taught us by word and by his own example that the power of forgiving

love is stronger than the hate of violent force. Therefore, we extend forgiveness to you.”

Troyer said the hostages had “prayed for their captors and told them about God’s love and their need to repent.”

The missionaries were abducted Oct. 16 shortly after visiting an orphanage in Ganthier, in the Croix-des-Bouquets area, where they verified it had received aid from CAM and played with the children, Troyer said.

“As they became aware of what was happening at the time of capture, the group began singing the chorus, ‘The angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear Him, and delivereth them,’” Troyer said, quoting from the biblical book of Psalms. “This song became a favorite of theirs, and they sang it many times throughout their days of captivity.”

The hostages remained together as a group throughout, he said, in prayer, in song and encouraging each other.

Troyer said CAM workers were aware of dangers in Haiti, where gang activity and kidnappings have been on the rise.

But the organization often works in such perilous places precisely because “that is usually where the biggest needs are,” he added.

CAM hopes to continue working in Haiti, Troyer said, while acknowledging that it will need to bolster security protocols and “better instruct our people about the dangers involved.”

Authorities have said 400 Mawozo was demanding \$1 million per person in ransom, although it wasn’t clear if that included the children. The gang’s leader had threatened to kill the hostages unless his demands were met.

Also Friday, a meeting including representatives of 14 countries, various international organizations and Haitian Prime Minister Ariel Henry produced broad commitments to address security and the political and economic situation in the impoverished Caribbean nation, according to a top U.S. diplomat.

Brian A. Nichols, assistant secretary at the State Department’s Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, said on a conference call that the U.S. government plans to send experts to train the Haitian National Police SWAT team.

In another pledge, Japan promised \$3 million in aid including for the construction of police housing and facilities.

Nichols said there was discussion of some nations potentially deploying police to Haiti for activities such as training or mentoring local officers, though that would require more discussion first. He said there was broad agreement that the security situation in the country is a policing challenge, not a military one.

Nichols did not provide details on how the hostages were freed, citing respect for their privacy. Asked about rumors that a ransom was paid, he declined to comment other than to say “the United States government does not pay ransom for hostages.”

Associated Press religion coverage receives support from the Lilly Endowment through The Conversation U.S. The AP is solely responsible for this content.

Deceptive videos used to link athlete deaths to COVID shots

By ANGELO FICHERA and SOPHIA TULP Associated Press

Jake West was a seemingly healthy 17-year-old when he collapsed during high school football practice in Indiana and died of sudden cardiac arrest. A video widely shared online falsely suggests COVID-19 vaccination is to blame, weaving headlines about him into a rapid-fire compilation of news coverage about athletes collapsing.

The vaccine played no role in West’s death — he died from an undiagnosed heart condition in 2013, seven years before the pandemic began.

The video is just one example of many similar compilations circulating on the internet that use deceptive tactics to link vaccines to a supposed wave of deaths and illness among the healthiest people, often athletes, a claim for which medical experts say there is no supporting evidence.

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The clips inundate viewers with a barrage of stories and headlines delivered without context, some translated from other languages and offering few details people can check on their own.

They are highly effective at spreading misinformation using a strategy that sows doubt and bypasses critical analysis, capitalizing on emotion, according to Norbert Schwarz, a professor of psychology and marketing at the University of Southern California.

"It's designed to foster that feeling that the vaccines may be risky," Schwarz said. "You're doing that with material that seems real, because it is real. All of these events actually happened, they just have nothing to do with the vaccines."

The nearly four-minute montage that included West's story originated on "The HighWire," an online talk show hosted by Del Bigtree that is popular among the anti-vaccine community, and gradually became magnified via social media.

It takes the viewer through more than 50 cases of medical emergencies in rapid succession while eerie music plays and a beating heart pulses in the background, ending with somber images of medics and teammates rushing to fallen athletes.

After airing the video, Bigtree noted on his show that there is "no proof" vaccines were responsible for the cases — even while suggesting they might be.

"All of these sports are mandating this vaccine on everybody in order to play, and I can only ask the very simple question, do you ever remember hearing a story of an athlete having a heart attack on the field?" Bigtree said.

Yet cases of sudden cardiac arrest — an abrupt malfunction of the heart, different from a heart attack — have long been documented among young athletes.

One analysis based on 2016 emergency medical services data estimated that there are more than 23,000 pediatric, out-of-hospital cardiac arrest cases in the U.S. annually — 4,000 of which were caused by primarily cardiac issues.

Dr. Jonathan Drezner, director of the University of Washington's Center for Sports Cardiology, said there is "no scientific evidence" that either COVID-19 or the mRNA vaccines have increased sudden cardiac arrest, often referred to as SCA, among athletes.

"SCA has been the leading cause of sudden death in athletes during sports and exercise well before the pandemic ever began," Drezner said. "There is no evidence that the cases shown in that video were caused by a vaccine."

A rare risk of myocarditis, a condition that causes inflammation of the heart and tends to occur mostly in young men and teen boys, has been associated with the mRNA vaccines from Pfizer and Moderna. Those affected usually recover quickly, however, and health officials have concluded that the benefits of vaccination outweigh the risks.

Experts point out that COVID-19 itself carries the risk of myocarditis, too.

Dr. Jonathan Kim, chief of sports cardiology at Emory University School of Medicine and team cardiologist for Atlanta's NFL, NBA and MLB teams, also disputed the claim that such cardiac issues among athletes are increasing.

"One of the key points that all of us in the sports cardiology community are really trying to emphasize is there have been tragic cases of athletes dying before COVID, and after COVID ends there are going to be tragic cases of sudden cardiac death," Kim said.

Still, the claims circulate widely online and gain traction in anti-vaccine circles.

Dr. Robert Malone, a self-identified inventor, and now skeptic, of the technology used in some COVID-19 vaccines, shared the "HighWire" video with his more than 440,000 Twitter followers, saying: "Safe and effective?"

Malone deleted it in late November, around the same time a lawyer sent a cease-and-desist order on behalf of the West family. He did not respond to an AP request for comment, but tweeted that he took the video down after learning it had been "doctored."

While a lack of details makes it impossible to check every case mentioned in the "HighWire" video, many

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the AP was able to examine had no connection with COVID-19 vaccines. Some local reporting showed environmental factors such as heat exhaustion or different underlying conditions could have played a role.

An early version of the video showed clips of the University of Florida's Keyontae Johnson collapsing during a basketball game, as did other compilations. But Johnson's collapse was in December 2020, before vaccines were widely available. University officials confirmed to AP that he was not vaccinated at the time.

Others featured in the video were Florida teen Ryne Jacobs, who collapsed during tennis practice in January 2021, and Danish soccer player Christian Eriksen, who suffered cardiac arrest on the field this June during a match vs. Finland. Neither were vaccinated, according to Jacobs' family and Eriksen's club.

The video was updated weeks later after issues were raised with some of the stories it included. Johnson's and Jacobs' cases were removed after they were found to be "no longer relevant due to timing or newly disclosed medical records or statements," Bigtree said in an emailed statement.

West's story remains in the latest iteration, as do other disputed cases, such as that of Jack Alkhatib, a 17-year-old South Carolina student who died during football practice in August. His mother, Kelly Hewins Alkhatib, said an autopsy revealed he had a rare heart disease unrelated to vaccines.

Some of the other athletes had reportedly received the vaccine, though the status of many others isn't clear. At least one, Dutch speed skater Kjeld Nuis, reportedly experienced pericarditis after being vaccinated, but he posted on Instagram soon after that he had recovered.

For West's family members, who have worked to raise awareness about sudden cardiac arrest through their Play for Jake Foundation, seeing his story co-opted in the service of spreading anti-vaccine misinformation has been distressing. His mother, Julie West, questioned whether those behind the videos ever considered the feelings of parents.

"My tragedy of losing my son is always upsetting, and to think that somebody would use that for their gain is very upsetting," she said. "It's mind-boggling to me that there are people out there like that that want to spread or have their own agenda."

Associated Press writer Mark Long in Gainesville, Fla., contributed to this report.

Three NFL games moved due to COVID-19 outbreaks

By BARRY WILNER AP Pro Football Writer

The NFL has moved three games because of COVID-19 outbreaks: Las Vegas at Cleveland from Saturday to Monday; and Seattle at the Los Angeles Rams and Washington at Philadelphia from Sunday to Tuesday.

The Browns could have been without as many as 16 regulars on Saturday, so the game is now scheduled to kick off at 5 p.m. EST Monday. It will be televised by NFL Network.

Washington and Philadelphia will play at 7 p.m. on Tuesday, as will the Seahawks and Rams. Both games will be televised by Fox and available on Sunday Ticket.

"We have made these schedule changes based on medical advice and after discussion with the NFLPA as we are seeing a new, highly transmissible form of the virus this week resulting in a substantial increase in cases across the league," the NFL said in a statement. "We continue to make decisions in consultation with medical experts to ensure the health and safety of the NFL community."

Previously, the NFL did not plan to move any games because of coronavirus outbreaks. It even said forfeits "could be in play." But recent developments with the omicron strain of COVID-19 has changed the league's thinking — as did several outbreaks across the league entering Week 15 of the season.

"We will make every effort, consistent with the underlying health and safety principles, to play our full schedule within the current 18 weeks," Commissioner Roger Goodell said in a memo sent to the 32 clubs and obtained by the AP. "Each team is obligated to have its team ready to play at the scheduled time and place. There is no right to postpone a game, and games will not be postponed or rescheduled because of roster issues affecting a particular position group or particular number of players.

"If games are postponed, we will make every effort to minimize the competitive and economic burden on the participating teams."

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The moves were not looked at kindly by some players.

"I pay my player dues just to get lied to and the rules bent!" Raiders linebacker K.J. Wright tweeted at the league and the players' union. "If it was the other way around I swear we would be playing tomorrow."

Eagles safety Rodney McLeod tweeted: "So we have to suffer, and compromise our schedule because of another teams mistake. Make it make sense!"

Seahawks coach Pete Carroll also suggested future game preparation should be taken into consideration.

"Yes, that's a big concern. Anytime you play Thursday game or this is like a Friday game, I think it's a big burden on the players," he said. "It's a big burden on the recovery time. It's not what their bodies want to do. They're trained to have a whole week to recover and they don't get it."

"Now, if our game (vs. Chicago on Dec. 26) could move back to Monday, that would help us some. I don't know, that would kind of get in the middle of the next week as well. I don't know what's going to happen, but I'm not a fan of that for the player sake."

Last season, in the midst of the coronavirus, the NFL completed its season on schedule, but had to re-schedule 15 games, some to midweek. In July, Goodell warned teams that no games would be rescheduled under such circumstances and, instead, forfeits could happen.

Earlier Friday, Saints coach Sean Payton tested positive for COVID-19 and was immediately isolated from the team.

Payton, who is vaccinated and tested positive in 2020 for the coronavirus, will remain isolated for 10 days unless he meets the league requirements for a fully vaccinated individual to return to the team environment.

The Saints said defensive coordinator Dennis Allen has been assigned head coaching duties for Sunday night's game at Tampa Bay. Payton is expected to return for New Orleans' game against the Miami Dolphins on Dec. 27.

The positive test for Payton comes after he missed practice Wednesday when the club said he was "under the weather" but had tested negative. Payton was back at practice and meetings on Thursday.

Payton's positive test came as COVID-19 cases spiked across the NFL in recent days, mirroring trends seen in the general population.

Three Saints players — defensive end Cameron Jordan, running back Mark Ingram and receiver Ty Montgomery — did not play against the New York Jets on Sunday because of positive COVID-19 tests. But all have been activated from New Orleans' reserve/COVID-19 list.

"Nobody can sit here and try to be Sean," Ingram said. "He's his own person and his own coach and what he brings to the table is irreplaceable. ... We're all leaning on each other and we're all going to fight for each other. We going to hold it down for Sean as long as he's gone."

"There's so many other people (around the NFL) that are positive this week. We just hope that everyone stays safe, everyone stays healthy and everyone recovers quickly."

The Saints (6-7) snapped a five-game skid when they beat the Jets 30-9 and remain in contention for one of the NFC's wild-card playoff spots with four regular-season games remaining.

In Week 2 of this season, the Saints were without numerous assistant coaches because of a virus outbreak, but Payton was not among those which tested positive. Payton was among the first NFL employees known to have contracted COVID-19 in the spring of 2020.

Also Friday:

—Washington put Taylor Heinicke on the COVID-19 list, making the team's quarterback plan for the upcoming game at Philadelphia a complete uncertainty.

Based on updated league rules, Heinicke could still play if he tests negative twice this weekend and remains asymptomatic. Backup Kyle Allen entered coronavirus protocol on Tuesday and also remains a possibility if he is cleared.

Practice squad QB Kyle Shurmur would be in line to start if neither Heinicke nor Allen is available. He played at Vanderbilt and is the son of Denver Broncos offensive coordinator Pat Shurmur.

Washington also signed Garrett Gilbert off New England's practice squad on Friday. Gilbert has one NFL start with Dallas but is familiar with coach Ron Rivera and offensive coordinator Scott Turner from their

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time together in 2018 with the Carolina Panthers.

With the addition of Heinicke and the removal of center Keith Ismael from the COVID-19 list, Washington has 21 players unavailable for virus-related reasons, including two players on injured reserve and two on the practice squad. The defense and special teams units have been decimated, with defensive tackles Jonathan Allen and Matt Ioannidis, pass rushers Montez Sweat and James-Smith Williams and safety Kamren Curl out. But the delay until Tuesday gives Washington a better chance of getting Allen, Sweat and others back.

Washington (6-7) is currently in the final NFC wild-card spot going into Week 15 at the Eagles, who are also 6-7 and coming off their bye week.

—With Baker Mayfield and Case Keenum on COVID-19 reserve, the Cleveland Browns are signing quarterback Kyle Lauletta, who spent training camp with the team. Lauletta's agent announced the move on Twitter.

Third-string quarterback Nick Mullens is slated to start. He made 16 starts over three seasons for the San Francisco 49ers.

Defensive end Jadeveon Clowney joined the team's massive COVID-19 list after a positive test, a person familiar with the situation told The Associated Press. Clowney tested positive along with linebackers Mack Wilson Sr. and Tony Fields, according to the person who spoke on condition of anonymity because the team had not announced the results of testing.

—Chicago added backup quarterback Andy Dalton and cornerback Duke Shelley to the COVID-19 list. It also activated offensive lineman Elijah Wilkinson, giving the Bears 13 players on the list. That includes receiver Allen Robinson, nose tackle Eddie Goldman and cornerback Artie Burns.

—The Panthers have added third-string QB Matt Barkley to the COVID-19 list. The team sequestered backup P.J. Walker to remote meetings earlier this week when Barkley became ill. They are monitoring the status of Cam Newton and Walker. If both of them wind up testing positive, Sam Darnold could be elevated from injured reserve — but only if his shoulder is cleared medically first.

—Buffalo placed starting left tackle Dion Dawkins on the COVID-19 list, leaving his status uncertain for Sunday against Carolina.

—Miami's Myles Gaskin was cleared to return to practice. The Dolphins had three running backs on the COVID-19 list before Gaskin was cleared. They play the Jets on Sunday.

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

Tornado victims include 7 members of Kentucky family

SUDHIN THANAWALA undefined

A week after a deadly tornado outbreak, families of the victims are still processing the terrible toll.

Authorities on Thursday found the body of a Kentucky teenager who had been missing. Nyssa Brown was the seventh member of her family to die in the tornado that hit Bowling Green last week, and family and neighbors say they are reeling. Elsewhere in Kentucky, Jason Cummins has been gathering mementos from the debris of the home his mom, Marsha Hall, and aunt, Carole Grisham, shared. The sisters were Dawson Springs fixtures who had worked at a funeral home helping others through their grief.

At least 92 people have been confirmed dead across multiple states after more than 40 tornadoes pummeled a wide area. Officials say 77 people died in Kentucky alone.

Here are some of the people who perished during the tornado outbreak.

Pam Gilbert, 60, worked at a Kentucky Dollar General store, where she was going to become a manager, according to her friend, Mamie Langston. Gilbert's son, Derek Gilbert, 44, had just started his first day on the job at a grocery store and was the type of person who would give you the shirt off his back, Langston said. Gilbert's sister, Jamey Waggoner, had helped Langston cope with the death of her fiancée, though she said he used to be married to Waggoner, 66.

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The Gilberts and Waggoner died when a tornado ripped through Mayfield, Kentucky. Pam Gilbert was great with kids and helped raise Langston's grandkids, Langston said.

The 65-year-old said she'll miss going dancing with her friend.

"We would just have a really good time," she said.

Siblings Marsha Hall, 72, and Carole Grisham, 80, were referred to as "the sisters" around Dawson Springs, Kentucky, friend Jenny Beshear Sewell said. They were often in each other's company and had lived in the same home for years, according to Hall's son, Jason Cummins. They were there together Friday night when a tornado approached and ripped through the house, killing both of them.

"They really just took care of each other," said Cummins, 43. "It was always the two of them. They were best friends."

Cummins said he texted his aunt and mother "good morning" and told them he loved them every day. On the day of the storm, he added that they should "watch the weather." He was tracking the storm on Facebook that night and told Hall to get Grisham and get in the hallway.

"She said, 'I cleaned out the closet in case I need to get in there.'" Cummins recalled. "She said, 'I love you.' She texted each of my siblings and said she loved them."

Cummins said he texted later but didn't hear back.

Hall was still working at a funeral home, where she arranged flowers and assisted grieving families. Grisham had also worked there in the past as had the sisters' mother.

Beshear Sewell, who owned the funeral home, said Hall was always thinking about what a family would need.

"It could be finances," she said. "It could be that grandmother is in a wheelchair and when they show up we're going to have to do this and that. It was just everything."

Recent health problems had limited Grisham's mobility, and Beshear Sewell said she's convinced Hall decided not to leave her and seek shelter elsewhere. She recalled that Hall would pick her grandson up from school even when he was old enough to walk home himself and the day was nice because she did not want anything to happen to him.

Cummins has been sifting through the debris at the home, keeping anything he finds intact — a door-knob, a key. He said he found his mom's purse with cash she had taken out of the bank to hand out at Christmas.

"I don't know how it's going to feel the day when I don't come up here and look for something," he said. "That's when I think it will hit me."

Carl Hogan, 60, was "incredibly devoted" to his wife of 41 years, and he was looking forward to getting her back home in Dawson Springs, Kentucky, following a stay in a hospital and nursing home that began in February, said daughter Katie Fields, who lived only a mile or so from her father.

"He was a retired long-haul trucker who had settled down in that small town to try to enjoy his golden years near my kids (and) along the banks of our little Tradewater River," Fields said in an message to The Associated Press.

The tornado left the plan in shreds. Fields said she spoke to her father on the phone just moments before the twister hit and made a desperate bid to get to his home afterward.

"I ran up & down his street screaming for him & throwing pieces of wood & metal trying to see if he was under the debris. I finally found his vehicles & from that could tell where his home was supposed to be & that it was totally gone," she wrote.

Hogan's body was located about a day later, and Fields said now she does not want him remembered as "the guy who died in the tornado." Hogan loved to fish and loved his green Chevrolet truck, she said, and he was a fan of the TV show "Yellowstone." His four grandchildren "were his world," she said, and Hogan was a "fantastic" father.

"He was religious but it was a quiet, private faith," Fields said. "He was truly just a good man."

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Ernie Aiken, 86, decided to ride the storm out in his trailer in Dawson Springs, Kentucky, despite the looming danger.

The Vermont native served in the U.S. Army at Fort Campbell and then settled in the town, said son Tony Aiken. He started two auto repair stations in the area and continued to work on people's cars at a shop next to his home until his death. The shop was a magnet for the community, and guys would come and hang out, taking advantage of seating he put out.

"I mean, he just loved people," said Aiken, 65. "It's not a high-income town. And so he would work on people's cars and say, 'Well, they need their car and they can't afford to pay me so pay me when you can.' The town loved him."

But he lived alone and had lost friends in recent years. Tony Aiken said his father was "ready to go" and was resigned to the danger of the storm.

"His attitude was, 'If I'm here tomorrow, great, and if I'm not, I'm not,'" his son said.

Jacob and Emma Gingerich lived with their five children in a trailer near Mayfield, Kentucky, that had no electricity or running water in accordance with their Amish tenets, The Washington Post reported. The trailer was ripped apart by a tornado that killed the couple, who were both 31, and two of their children, 7-year-old Marilyn and 4-year-old Daniel.

Jacob Gingerich was a hard worker and honest, said Daniel Yoder, 24. Yoder worked for Jacob Gingerich at his sawmill.

"He would not take a dollar from you," Yoder told the Post. "He used everybody fair."

Huda Alubahi grabbed her two young sons and sheltered in a closet as the tornado bore down on their home in Mayfield, Kentucky.

Shortly after closing the closet door, the house collapsed around them, she told CBS news in an interview. Alubahi was smashed in the face with a sink, unable to move her head and trapped by the debris, she said.

Her 1-year-old son began to cry, but she heard nothing from her 3-year-old son, Jhal'ilil. It took several people to pull the mother and children from the rubble, and it was only when she was in the hospital that Alubahi learned Jhal'ilil had died in her arms.

"He was something special," she said. "I wish I could have saved my son."

Julius, 1, had no injuries. "He was untouched, literally, nothing," Alubahi said.

Lannis Joe Ward, who worked at the Mayfield Consumer Products candle factory, had been saving money with girlfriend Autumn Kirks for months to buy a house. They were both at work the night a tornado leveled the building and afterward Kirks recalled glancing away from Ward for a few seconds only to look back and realize he had disappeared.

The Graves County coroner has since identified the 36-year-old Ward, who Kirks described as "a big teddy bear" in an interview with The Associated Press, as being among the dozens of people who died in the tornado outbreak.

Ward, who was a line leader at the plant, had five sons and two daughters, according to an obituary published by a funeral home. Also known as Joe Marshall Ward, he is survived by his mother and a brother.

Kirks said she has tried to explain to both her children and Ward's that he is no longer alive, but the youngest kids don't really understand what has happened.

"My 3-year-old just keeps asking to talk to Joe, and I don't know what to tell her," Kirks told MSNBC.

Robert Baldree, 87, died in a hospital hours after the tornado struck Mayfield, Kentucky.

A pipefitter engineer and member of the First Baptist Church of Mayfield, Baldree is survived by a wife who was left with virtually nothing by the storm, according to an obituary and public messages posted by a daughter on social media. His other survivors include another daughter, a son and three sisters.

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Jill Monroe is remembered by loved ones in lots of ways — as a mom, grandmother, sister and friend. She had moved to Mayfield, Kentucky, in August to get a fresh start.

Monroe, 52, was among the people at work at a candle factory in town when a twister slammed into the building. She didn't make it out alive, but a co-worker told son Chris Chism that his mother was trying to protect others when the storm struck, WHAS-TV reported.

"(Monroe's friend) said that all of the sudden they were told that they needed to get back to the hallway or the bathroom and that the tornado was close," Chism said. "She said they got in there, and it wasn't five minutes after they got into the bathroom. She and her sister went in the first stall. She said, 'The last time I saw your mom she ran into the last stall and took a bunch of people with her. We all laid down and tried to hold on.'"

Christmas was one of Monroe's favorite times of the year, which will make the upcoming holiday that much tougher, Chism said.

"I was able to recover some of the presents that she got for the kids," Chism said. "We're going to get them wrapped and we're going to put 'from Mimi' on them. Our little elf friend that's running around the house is going to have a picture of her in his lap sitting on them and we're just going to let the kids try to have the day because that's what she would have wanted. Christmas was all about watching the babies open their presents."

Bobby Spradling Jr., 50, helped niece Melissa Rayo through the toughest time of her life before losing his own in the tornado that hit Mayfield, Kentucky.

Spradling, who worked as a carpet installer, took Rayo into his own home following the death of her mother during her senior year in high school, Rayo told The New York Times. After she graduated, Rayo said, he invited her on a family vacation to Garden of the Gods, a spectacular natural attraction in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

"Most of all, I'll remember how kind he was and how he helped me through the hardest time," she said.

Spradling, whose parents and five sisters died before him, according to an obituary, was survived by a son and daughter and two brothers.

At the Ridgewood Terrace Health and Rehabilitation nursing home in Madisonville, Kentucky, Claude Mitchell did more than just laundry. Whenever he stopped by residents' rooms with clean clothes and fresh linens, he would say or do something to brighten their day.

"Claude took a liking to my mom, and he was the greatest joy in her day when he would come in and talk to her for a few minutes," said Jeannie Buckner, whose 97-year-old mother lives at Ridgewood Terrace. "I can't even tell you how she lit up when he would come in."

Residents and staff gathered outside the 110-bed nursing home Monday to release balloons into the air in memory of Mitchell. They learned over the weekend that the 65-year-old laundry worker was killed in the deadly storms that destroyed homes and buildings in nearby Dawson Springs, where he lived.

Mitchell had worked for about six years at the nursing home, said Lauren Lloyd, the facility's administrator. He would often stop by the nurses' station and other gathering places for staff members, she said, asking co-workers how their day was going.

"It's just a deep loss for us to lose someone that had such a bright personality," Lloyd said. "The staff are taking it hard."

Buckner said Mitchell would often dote on her mother: letting her handle his gold necklaces and bracelets, bringing her candy bars and sometimes even spending his lunch breaks chatting in her room.

"I just can't say enough good about him," Buckner said. "I never saw him in a bad mood. And when he was there, everybody seemed to be in a better mood."

DeAndre Morrow, 28, was among six people killed when a twister struck an Amazon warehouse in Edwardsville, Illinois.

An online appeal started by Morrow's fiancée, Chelsea Thomas, said Morrow hoped to become a household name through business ventures including car washes, grocery stores and laundries. He wanted to

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build housing for low-income families, she wrote.

"He strived to make life better for his family, friends, and community," she said.

A law firm has announced it will represent relatives of the St. Louis native and is seeking answers about whether employees at the Amazon facility had sufficient warning about the danger of the approaching twister.

Timothy Venetta remembers 13-year-old Nyssa Brown as a little girl who used to ride her four-wheeler through his backyard. Authorities on Thursday found the Kentucky teenager's body in a wooded area near her subdivision. She was the seventh member of her family to die in the tornado that hit Bowling Green last week.

"I can't imagine a whole family just being gone in the blink of an eye," Jennifer Venetta told WZTV in Nashville, Tennessee. She and Timothy Venetta lived on the same street as the Brown family, according to the station.

The girl's parents, three siblings ranging in age from 4 to 16 and a grandmother also died in the tornado. A coroner identified the children as Nariah Cayshelle Brown, 16, Nyles Brown, 4, and Nollynn Brown, and the grandmother as Victoria Smith, 64. The parents were identified as Steven Brown, 35, and Rachel Brown, 36, though her name on social media is listed as "Rachael."

The family lived on a street where 12 people died, including five relatives from another family and eight children. Neighbors who survived are grief-stricken — surrounded by ruins that include children's toys.

Rochelle Finkton said her sister, Rachael Brown, enjoyed being a mother.

"I mean, she loved them kids to the moon," Finkton told WSMV-TV in Nashville.

Nearly everyone who knew Kayla Smith at Mayfield Consumer Products considered her a friend, partly because she worked in so many different areas of the candle factory, and that's where she was the night a killer tornado pummeled the structure.

Smith, 30, died with one of the friends she made at the factory, Michelle Hand, holding her hand, The Washington Post reported. While Hand didn't work there anymore, she told the newspaper she hurried to the site and found Smith amid the rubble.

"I just held her hand and begged her to hold on, and begged God not to take her," Hand said. "I said, 'Babe, I got you, I'm here, please, please.'"

Smith's longtime partner, Justin Bobbett, also worked at the factory and survived. Dozens of people on social media have posted messages expressing sorrow over his loss.

Cory Mitchell Scott worked in construction and, according to his obituary, spent his spare time "playing basketball, shooting guns, souping up trucks and listening to loud music."

The coroner for Warren County, Kentucky, confirmed 27-year-old Scott of Bowling Green was killed at home as deadly tornadoes struck the Midwest and South.

Scott inherited a love of woodworking from his father and had a job with a local contractor remodeling kitchens and bathrooms, building custom furniture and other construction projects, according to his obituary in the Bowling Green Daily News.

"He was the life of the party and loved getting his friends together more than anything," the obit said. "A friend to Cory was family, and there was no such thing as a stranger to him."

Amazon employee Etheria Hebb, 34, and a co-worker spent the day delivering packages before the weather began turning bad. Then they returned to the company's warehouse near Edwardsville, Illinois.

The fellow employee, Jaeira Hargrove, told the St. Louis Post-Dispatch neither was overly concerned about the severe weather threat, having grown up around St. Louis where they were used to weather warnings.

"We were just standing there talking. That's when we heard the noise. It felt like the floor started moving. We all got closer to each other. We all started screaming," Hargrove told the newspaper.

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A online fundraiser for the Hebb family said the woman was beloved and left behind a 1-year-old son and other relatives.

Jeff and Jennifer Eckert divided their time between Kentucky and the Gulf coast of Florida, where he started a book publishing company near Sarasota in 1988.

The couple from Dawson Springs, Kentucky, were identified by a county coroner as being among those who perished in the deadly tornado outbreak that devastated areas of the Midwest and South.

Jeff Eckert, 70, was the founder of J.K. Eckert & Co., which published more than 400 books for some of the larger publishing houses, according to his obituary in The Messenger newspaper of Madisonville, Kentucky. He played music in several bands over the years and was a small aircraft pilot.

Jennifer Eckert, 69, had worked in an optometrist's office for 15 years, her obituary said. She loved to travel and host cookouts with family and friends.

Days after the tornadoes hit Tennessee, Sandy Gunn still clings to her phone, anxious for any news on a brother-in-law who is missing following a weekend duck hunting trip in the rural western region of the state.

Gunn's brother, Steve, 50, and Steve Gunn's son, Grayson, 12, had traveled from Florida with a small group to stay at the Cypress Point Resort — a popular destination for hunters and anglers due to its close location to Reelfoot Lake. One of the several tornadoes to hit Tennessee tore through the building in the middle of the night, sucking the father and son into the storm as they huddled in the second story. Their bodies were later found just a few feet away among the debris and uprooted trees.

"(Steve) could build a house from a matchbook," Sandy said in an interview with The Associated Press. "You couldn't go to Walmart with him without a hundred people stopping him. His son was the kid you grew up dreaming to have."

Adding to Gunn's heartbreak is her missing brother-in-law, Jamie Hall, who was also part of the hunting group.

First responders, family members and residents have all jumped in to help find him, but to date, no progress has been made.

"Our world has been shattered," Gunn said. "I'm terrified each time I hear the phone ring. My brother-in-law was the kindest and most gentle man you would have ever known."

A funeral for Steve and Grayson Gunn is scheduled for Saturday in Tallahassee, Florida.

By the time she won election to a vacant school board seat last year, Jenny Bruce had played a role at virtually every level in the small school district in Dawson Springs, Kentucky, where she had graduated from high school decades earlier.

"Jenny started out driving a bus and she was a teacher's aide, and she gradually worked her way up to finance director," Dawson Springs School Superintendent Leonard Whalen recalled. "She was some kind of lady."

During the deadly tornado outbreak late Friday and early Saturday, the 65-year-old Bruce was sheltering inside when a tornado obliterated her home, Whalen said. He said neighbors found her amid the wreckage. A county coroner later confirmed her death.

Bruce had worked for the school system for roughly four decades before retiring about two years ago. Whalen helped persuade her to campaign for an empty seat on the five-member school board in 2020, and she ended up running unopposed.

In her years working in the school district's administrative office, Whalen said, Bruce was universally liked, never saying an unkind word about anyone and often bringing cookies and other treats for co-workers to share.

"She was a Dawson Springs graduate and she loved our schools," Whalen said. "She loved kids."

Kevin Dickey loved spending time with his family and "stole the show and the hearts of his grandchildren

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anytime he was around," his family said in a statement. He also had a tight bond with his co-workers at Amazon, they said.

Dickey, 62, was among six people killed when an Amazon warehouse in Edwardsville, Illinois, was struck. Authorities say both sides of the warehouse used to prepare orders for delivery collapsed inward and the roof caved. Rescuers had to pull survivors from the rubble.

Dickey's daughter, Kristen Anastasi, told the Marion Republican that a co-worker said Dickey was trying to get people to safety and making sure his drivers were OK. She called his work ethic "unmatched" and said that's what the family would expect of him.

"Dad talked often about his co-workers and their daily stories. He had a great bond with many," the family said.

Douglas Koon, his wife, Jackie, and their three children huddled in his mother-in-law's bathroom in Dawson Springs, Kentucky, as the storms approached. The tornado hit the house directly, flinging the family around and tossing in the air a bathtub that was shielding two of his sons. The couple put their infant daughter, Oaklynn, in a car seat to protect her, and she appeared to be OK on Saturday.

But by Sunday, the baby was having seizures, and doctors noticed a brain bleed after she was taken to the hospital. They believed she had a stroke, Koon said in a Facebook post.

Early Monday morning, the family posted that the infant had died.

In a text message to The Associated Press on Monday, Koon said he was struggling "to process everything that I'm going through."

A family member has set up a GoFundMe account for Koon's family and his mother-in-law, Sheila Rose, who lost her home.

Lisa Taylor had worked 14 years as a florist at the same family-owned shop in Memphis, Tennessee, when she left in October to start a new career at the airport with the Transportation Security Administration. Co-workers at Rachel's Flowers congratulated her with balloons on a sign that read, "Good Luck, Lisa."

Taylor, 54, stayed in touch with her friends at the flower shop, making plans to return part time over the holidays to make some extra money. Then the phone rang Saturday, just as the power came back on at the shop after violent storms passed through overnight. Taylor's longtime boyfriend was calling with tragic news. A large tree had fallen through her roof overnight, killing Taylor as she slept in bed.

"She had just gotten started on her new adventure and she's just been taken," said Angie Morton, who worked as a florist alongside Taylor for several years.

A single mother of two children now in their 20s, Taylor took her new government job for higher wages and the extra stability that came with health insurance and other benefits, friends said.

But she had a creative spark that made her a natural when it came to working with flowers, Morton said, whether she was helping grieving families design funeral arrangements or using bits and pieces of broken, castoff jewelry to add some custom sparkle to high school girls' prom corsages.

"She really liked to bling everything up," Morton said. "She would take stuff other people would throw in the trash and make beautiful things out of it. If she found an earring in a store that didn't have a matching pair, she would think, 'I know there's somebody who that would be perfect for her corsage.'"

Charles Newell, deputy emergency management administrator for Shelby County, Tennessee, said she was the only known storm death in the county that includes Memphis.

Rachel Greer, the flower shop's owner, was helping plan floral arrangements for Taylor's funeral. She said Taylor's daughter had requested "a sea of purple flowers" such as lavender roses and chrysanthemums to match her mother's favorite color.

Meanwhile customers were dropping by the shop to offer condolences and leaving notes. One of them read: "Lisa was a light in a dark world."

Annistyn Rackley was an outgoing and energetic 9-year-old who loved swimming, dancing and cheer-leading, according to her great-aunt Sandra Hooker.

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The two had become close over the past four years: Hooker offered the girl support during doctor's visits and blood draws required by a rare liver condition that still didn't keep the southeastern Missouri girl from participating in activities.

Annistyn, her parents and her two younger sisters took shelter Friday night in a windowless bathroom in their new home west of Caruthersville, Missouri. To prove they'd gotten to the family's "safe space," the girls' mom texted Hooker a photo of the three in and next to the bathtub — all of them smiling, 9-year-old Annistyn holding her favorite doll.

Fifteen minutes later, Sandra Hooker said, a tornado splintered the home, carrying the family members dozens of yards through the air into a field where first responders found them in mud. Annistyn died, and the others were injured.

Hooker called Annistyn a "special angel" and said the girl delighted in donning outfits and makeup for cheer competitions and learning new dances from TikTok. She did cartwheels and splits in front of Hooker.

"I would just gasp because she could do the splits all the time, and she would just laugh," Hooker said. "She loved dancing."

Hooker teaches gifted students at the same elementary school where Meghan Rackley teaches kindergarten in Caruthersville, which is nestled next to the Mississippi River in what's known as Missouri's Bootheel region.

Hooker said Annistyn's parents learned when she was 2 months old that she had a rare liver disorder in which bile ducts don't develop properly, sometimes making it hard to fight off illness.

Golden Wes Hembrey, 94, died when a tornado destroyed the nursing home where he lived in Monette, Arkansas.

His nephew Mike Hembrey said the Korean War veteran and retired farmer had been in the nursing home since 2016 because of Alzheimer's disease. But he remembered his uncle as engaged with his extended family throughout their younger years.

"He was outgoing," his nephew said. "He'd be out in the yard playing with us. But don't make him mad. When he was mad, he was mad."

"He liked cutting up, telling jokes," said niece Kristie Carmichael.

The Hembreys said Jimmie Hembrey had visited his brother the day before the tornado and found him to be in good health.

Graves County Deputy Jailer Robert Daniel was supervising inmate workers at a candle factory in Mayfield, Kentucky, when the tornado struck. His boss said Monday that Daniel had been focused on the prisoners in his care when he was killed.

Daniel, 47, had worked at the county jail for a few years previously and was rehired a few months ago, said Graves County Jailer George Workman. The seven inmates whom Daniel was overseeing at the factory Friday night were part of a brand-new work program and had just begun their jobs three days earlier.

After the storm hit, the inmates told Workman's deputies that it was Daniel who literally had pushed them all to safety, guiding them through a doorway and against a wall in an interior part of the plant. Workman said the last inmate through the door told deputies that Daniel was behind him one moment, and suddenly he was gone.

"He was physically still in the act of trying to get them to safety. And that's when it hit," Workman said. "It takes a tremendous person to be able to lay their own life down for somebody else. But he did and he was doing it for the right reasons."

All seven of the inmates in Daniel's care survived, Workman said, with two of them suffering broken legs.

A cousin, Mark Saxton Sr., said Daniel was a native of the Mayfield area, which was devastated by the storm.

"He loved his community," Saxton said. "He was a great family man. Everybody who met him just loved him. He's the type of person you want to be associated with."

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Brian Crick, a judge for two western Kentucky counties, was known for his sound judgment when it came to solving problems, a fellow judge said.

Crick, 43, was a district judge for Muhlenberg and McLean counties who handled criminal misdemeanor cases, traffic court and juvenile cases, said Circuit Judge Brian W. Wiggins. Wiggins said he had known his fellow judge since 2005, when Crick was a public defender. He later was in private practice before taking the bench in 2011.

Many of the defendants who came before him weren't represented by attorneys, and Crick "was very good about seeing to it that their rights were protected," Wiggins said. "He had a very common-sense approach. He was very level-headed about how to handle cases and how to talk to people."

Wiggins was killed when the storm hit his family's home in Muhlenberg County. He is survived by a wife and three children, all of whom made it through the storm without major injuries, Wiggins said. "He was just a consummate family man ... very engaged with his children and his wife. They were No. 1 to him."

"We are especially heartbroken to get the news," Kentucky Supreme Court Chief Justice John Minton said in a statement. "This is a shocking loss to his family, his community and the court system and his family is in our prayers."

Two of June Pennington's children said the Manila, Arkansas, resident was devoted to her four children and nine grandchildren and had a particular soft spot for animals.

Pennington, 52, was working as an assistant manager at a Dollar General store in nearby Leachville, Arkansas, when it was hit.

"She didn't love anything as much in life as her kids and grandkids," said Christie Pennington. "She was truly selfless and loved wholeheartedly."

David Benefield, the oldest of June Pennington's four children, said he was born when his mother was only 14.

"She was a kid raising a kid. We were just like best friends," he said. "It's crazy how close you become."

Her children remember her as someone who "would do anything that we asked her to do," Benefield said. Even after her children were grown, they said June Pennington wanted to spend as much time with them as possible.

Christie Pennington said her mother adopted dogs, cats, rabbits, birds, turtles and even a ferret. "If there was ever an animal in need of a home, we took it in," she said.

Ollie Borgmann, 84, was a sweet and "typical grandmother" who had lived in her home in Defiance, Missouri, for decades.

A tornado blew through the home she shared with her 84-year-old husband, Vernon, on Friday night, blowing the house off its foundation, as well as that of a neighbor's house in the town located about 40 miles (64 kilometers) west of St. Louis.

Her son Mark Borgmann told the St. Louis Post-Dispatch that his brother, Keith, was on the phone with their father during the powerful storm when the line went dead. The next thing Vernon Borgmann remembers is waking up in a nearby field surrounded by debris. He suffered scratches and bruises but will be OK, said Mark Borgmann.

When Ollie Borgmann was found by rescuers, she was awake. She died later at a hospital.

Clayton Lynn Cope, 29, had been working at Amazon for more than a year before the storm killed him at a company facility in southwestern Illinois.

Five other workers also died at the facility located outside St. Louis.

Cope, who lived in nearby Alton, Illinois, had joined the Navy after graduating from high school and was an avid outdoorsman who also liked to ride motorcycles and play video games. He had a special place in his heart for his dog, Draco, said his younger sister, Rachel Cope.

"He would go out of his way for anyone," Cope said in a written message.

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Associated Press writers Russ Bynum in Savannah, Georgia; Kimberlee Kruesi and Travis Loller in Nashville, Tennessee; Dylan Lovan in Louisville, Kentucky; John Hanna in Topeka, Kansas; Terry Wallace in Dallas; Sophie Tareen in Chicago; Josh Funk in Omaha, Nebraska; Mike Schneider in Orlando, Florida; and Jeff Amy in Atlanta contributed to this report.

In SC, Biden pledges fight for voting rights, police reform

By MEG KINNARD, JOSH BOAK and DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

ORANGEBURG, S.C. (AP) — President Joe Biden pledged Friday to fight for stalled voting rights and police reform legislation, addressing graduates of South Carolina State University amid the harsh reality that months of talks with lawmakers have failed to move the measures closer to becoming law.

Biden spoke at the historically Black school a day after conceding that his nearly \$2 trillion social and environmental bill was unlikely to become law this year, as he had hoped, due to continued disagreement among fellow Democrats. Republicans unanimously oppose the spending.

Wearing a black gown as he delivered the December commencement address, the president bemoaned GOP opposition keeping voting rights bills from advancing in the 50-50 Senate following passage by the Democratic-controlled House. He blamed "that other team, which used to be called the Republican Party," for refusing to even allow the bills to be debated.

"But this battle's not over," Biden said. "We're going to keep up the fight until we get it done."

Biden's vow to keep pushing to protect what he called "the sacred right to vote" as the NAACP and similar groups have grown frustrated with the White House over the lack of progress on the issue. Voting rights is a priority for Democrats heading into next year's midterm elections after Republican-controlled legislatures passed a wave of restrictive new voting laws.

Biden pledged similar advocacy for police reform, another issue important to the Black community after a series of killings of Black men by police, including George Floyd's death last year after a Minneapolis police officer knelt on his neck for about nine minutes.

The House passed a sweeping police reform measure earlier this year in response to Floyd's killing, but months of negotiations among a bipartisan group of senators failed to produce a bill.

Biden vowed to keep pressing for police reform, too.

"The fight's not over," he said at the alma mater of House Majority Whip Jim Clyburn, the highest-ranking Black member of Congress and South Carolina's only Democrat in the delegation. Clyburn, who sat on stage with Biden, accepted his degree from the president, a longtime friend.

Part rah-rah speech for the graduates as they prepare to venture out into the world, Biden at times sounded more like a candidate as he used the appearance before a predominantly Black audience to stress how his administration is working to improve their economic and educational standing, from increased funding for historically Black colleges and universities to fighting housing discrimination.

Black voters, in South Carolina and other states, were a crucial part of the coalition that helped Biden win election as president.

He also touched on the infrastructure bill he recently signed into law, including the promise of thousands of new jobs, but avoided discussing his centerpiece social welfare and environmental bill. That measure remains bottled up in the Senate, largely due to opposition from a fellow Democrat, Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia, and facing an uncertain fate next year, when Democrats need accomplishments to show as they campaign for reelection in the November.

Biden also pledged to help stamp out hate and racism, referenced the Jan. 6 insurrection at the Capitol, carried out in hopes of subverting his election, and talked about his appreciation for historically Black colleges and universities. He noted that key members of his team had graduated from historically Black schools, including Vice President Kamala Harris, a Howard University alum.

"You can defeat hate, but you can't eliminate it," Biden said. "It just slides back under a rock and, when given oxygen by political leaders, it comes out ugly and mean as it was before. We can't give it any oxy-

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gen. We have to step on it.”

He did not discuss legislative strategy, including how he would turn hard Democratic opposition to the \$2 trillion plan into support. All he offered was the promise to keep fighting — the same advice he gave the graduates.

Biden told them their “secret power” is the ability to understand the injustices and complications of the world, with the enduring legacies of racism leaving Black Americans at a disadvantage in home ownership and economic mobility.

There were no December ceremonies when Clyburn graduated in 1961, so he received his diploma by mail. Instead of addressing this year’s graduates, as had been planned, Clyburn joined the procession of students on stage to receive his degree from Biden, whom he invited to deliver the commencement address.

The president visited at a fraught time for his agenda, with the future of his \$2 trillion social and environmental spending package in doubt. While Democrats had hoped to make progress on the bill before Christmas, continued disagreements among lawmakers have all but halted negotiations, and Biden himself has signaled Democrats should shift their focus to passing a voting rights bill — another heavy lift in the evenly divided Senate.

On Friday, Senate Democrats huddled privately, as they have for weeks, discussing with parliamentary experts ways to adjust the chamber’s filibuster rules so they can push past Republican opposition and pass voting and election bills ahead of the 2022 midterms. No decisions have been reached, but senators insist they’re making progress.

Biden and Clyburn had been planning a gathering in South Carolina, Clyburn told reporters this week, and they figured Friday’s ceremony would suffice. The meetup is significant for both, in that it’s Biden’s first time as president in South Carolina, where Clyburn’s public support is credited with boosting Biden to the Democratic presidential nomination.

On the cusp of South Carolina’s first-in-the-South primary, after struggling through less-than-stellar performances in other early-voting contests, Biden secured a public endorsement from Clyburn, an awaited signal for many Black voters that Biden would be the candidate to stand up for their interests.

Biden subsequently bested chief rival Bernie Sanders on Super Tuesday and claimed the nomination before defeating Republican incumbent Donald Trump in the general election.

Superville reported from Washington. AP Congressional Correspondent Lisa Mascaro contributed to this report from Washington.

Meg Kinnard can be reached at <http://twitter.com/MegKinnardAP>.

Uncertainty follows court’s rejection of Purdue opioids deal

By GEOFF MULVIHILL Associated Press

A federal judge’s decision to reject a multibillion dollar opioid settlement involving OxyContin maker Purdue Pharma is being hailed as a step toward justice by advocates who have long called for greater accountability for the family that owns the company.

But not everyone involved in the arduous settlement process is celebrating, including some advocates who have lost loved ones to the nation’s ongoing — and growing — addiction crisis. The ruling Thursday from New York-based U.S. District Court Judge Colleen McMahon is a blow to those who sought to use billions of dollars from Purdue and from the Sackler family members involved with the company to fight the epidemic.

“It could be dragged out for months, if not years,” said Cheryl Juairé of Massachusetts, who has lost two grown sons to opioid overdoses.

Juairé founded an organization for grieving parents and was a voice for victims on a committee during the Purdue bankruptcy proceedings that led to the settlement vacated this week.

“Every day, 265 people are dying. The attorneys are getting richer because they’ve still got a job to do,

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and lives are being lost," she said. "When is somebody going to say, 'This is all about the lives?'"

Avi Israel also lost a son to opioid addiction, but sees this week's ruling differently. Like Juare, he has dedicated his life to fighting addiction, starting Save the Michaels of the World, a group that has helped get 1,200 people in western New York into addiction treatment this year.

He said Thursday's decision was the right one.

"You could give me all the money in the world; that's not going to bring my son back," said Israel, who also sits on a state board that helps distribute money New York brings in from opioid litigation.

Allowing lawsuits to move forward against Sackler family members could have a more long-lasting effect by deterring corporate executives from pushing medications they know could cause harm.

"I want them to know what it feels like for millions of us in this holiday season, when you sit at the table and you stare at an empty chair and you know that all of that could have been avoided," he said.

The contrasting views of justice in the Purdue Pharma bankruptcy reflect a complicated case at the center of multiple lawsuits seeking to hold players in the drug industry accountable for the nationwide epidemic of addiction and overdoses. Combined, prescription and illicit versions of the drugs have been linked to more than 500,000 deaths in the U.S. over the past two decades, and it's gotten worse during the coronavirus pandemic. Federal officials say there were 100,000 overdose deaths in the 12 months that ended in April, the majority of them from opioids.

The Purdue case is the highest-profile, but it's not the largest opioid settlement in the works. The drug distribution companies AmerisourceBergen, Cardinal Health and McKesson, plus drugmaker Johnson & Johnson, have agreed to a settlement worth \$26 billion over time. The deal relies on having a critical mass of local governments surrender their right to sue and sign on.

Facing thousands of lawsuits from state and local governments, unions, hospitals and others, Purdue filed for bankruptcy protection in 2019 as part of an effort to settle the cases. After negotiations and mediation, it reached a deal supported by the overwhelming majority of state and local governments, as well as individuals with claims who voted on it.

The plan calls for Sackler family members to give up ownership of Purdue. The transformed company would continue to make OxyContin, but with profits going to fight the opioid crisis. It also would try to develop low- or no-cost drugs to reverse overdoses and treat addictions. Sackler family members would contribute \$4.5 billion over time in cash and charitable assets.

Most of the money would flow to government entities, which would be obligated to use it to fight the crisis and not just to fill their budgets.

"The most important thing to me is that in the plan, every single penny has to be used for the epidemic," Juare said.

Because of the advocacy of Juare and other representatives of victims, a portion of the settlement — \$750 million — would go to individual victims and their families. Payments were expected to range from \$3,500 to \$48,000. That set the Purdue deal apart from other large opioid settlements, where money for individual victims is not included.

But the deal came with one catch that angered many advocates, state attorneys general and others: The Sacklers would be protected from all current and future civil lawsuits over the toll of opioids.

Under a 2020 settlement with the U.S. Department of Justice, the company pleaded guilty to criminal charges in a deal that would waive most of their \$8.3 billion in penalties and forfeitures as long as it entered a settlement that would use money to fight the opioid crisis. Members of the Sackler family agreed separately to pay \$225 million to settle federal civil claims. There are no indications that criminal charges could emerge against family members, though some activists are pressing officials to file them.

Eight states and the U.S. Bankruptcy Trustee, a part of the Department of Justice, objected to the bankruptcy settlement and appealed after a U.S. Bankruptcy Court judge accepted the deal in September.

Their arguments swayed Judge McMahon. In her ruling, she said bankruptcy law does not give judges the power to accept deals that protect people who are not themselves filing for bankruptcy protection if some parties in the case don't agree.

The decision "puts a fine point on the idea that there cannot be two systems of justice in this country,"

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one for the wealthy and one for everyone else," Washington state Attorney General Bob Ferguson said in an interview Friday.

Purdue said it would appeal but that it also would keep trying to find a settlement all parties would accept.

McMahon anticipated an appeal in her ruling: "This opinion will not be the last word on the subject, nor should it be." She said the issue of third-party releases has hovered over bankruptcy law for decades, with federal circuit courts disagreeing about whether they can be granted.

The appeal will go to the New York-based U.S. 2nd Circuit Court of Appeals. It's expected that whichever side loses will ask the U.S. Supreme Court to weigh in.

Congress also has considered legislation that would prohibit the kind of protections granted to Sackler family members, but the bill has stalled.

Representatives of the Sackler family have said in court, depositions and congressional hearings that they have not done anything improper and are not responsible for the opioid epidemic. They have not commented on Thursday's ruling.

The Department of Justice, under different leadership than it was 13 months ago when Purdue pleaded guilty, praised McMahon's decision.

"The bankruptcy court did not have the authority to deprive victims of the opioid crisis of their right to sue the Sackler family," U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland said in a statement.

Mulvihill reported from Cherry Hill, New Jersey.

Toughest sentence yet for any Capitol rioter: over 5 years

By COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A Capitol rioter who attacked police officers working to hold back the angry pro-Trump mob on Jan. 6 was sentenced Friday to more than five years behind bars, the most so far for anyone sentenced in the insurrection.

Robert Palmer, 54, of Largo, Florida, wept as he told U.S. District Judge Tanya Chutkan that he recently watched a video of his actions that day and could not believe what he was seeing.

"Your honor. I'm really really ashamed of what I did," he said through tears.

Palmer was one of several rioters sentenced on Friday in District of Columbia court for their actions that day, when the angry mob descended to disrupt the certification of Joe Biden's victory following a rally by then-President Donald Trump. Scores of police were beaten and bloodied, five people died and there was about \$1.5 million in damage done to the U.S. Capitol. Palmer is the 65th defendant to be sentenced overall. More than 700 people have been charged.

A college student who posted online that "Infamy is just as good as fame" after she climbed through a broken window at Capitol was sentenced to a month in jail for her actions. Gracyn Courtright, 23, of Hurricane, West Virginia, didn't injure anyone, though, and her sentence reflected that.

But Palmer made his way to the front line during the chaos and started to attack, throwing a wooden plank, spraying a fire extinguisher, then hurling it when it was done. He rooted around for other objects, prosecutors said. He was briefly pepper-sprayed by police before he attacked officers again with a pole. He pleaded guilty to attacking officers.

Palmer said in a handwritten letter to the judge that he felt betrayed by Trump and his allies who fed them conspiracy theories.

"Trump supporters were lied to by those at the time who had great power," he wrote. "They kept spitting out the false narrative about a stolen election and how it was 'our duty' to stand up to tyranny."

Palmer, who has been held at the D.C. jail among fetid conditions that prompted a review by authorities, said it wasn't fair that he be punished so severely when the ringleaders aren't even behind bars.

The judge agreed — to a point. "It is true that the people who extorted you and encouraged you and rallied you to go and take action have not been charged," she said. "That is not the court's decision. I have my opinions but they are not relevant."

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Before Palmer's sentencing of 63 months, the longest prison term handed down for a Capitol rioter was 41 months. That was the sentence received by both Jacob Chansley, the Arizona man who wore a horned fur hat, bare chest and face paint inside the Capitol; and New Jersey gym owner Scott Fairlamb, the first person to be sentenced for assaulting a law enforcement officer during the riot.

"It has to be made clear ... trying to stop the peaceful transition of power and assaulting law enforcement officers is going to be met with certain punishment," the judge said. "There are going to be consequences. I'm not making an example of you. I'm sentencing you for the conduct you did."

Courtright, 23, of Hurricane, West Virginia, sobbed as she told U.S. District Court Judge Christopher Cooper that "if I could take back anything in my life it would be my actions on Jan. 6."

She posted photos of herself online — like scores of other rioters — reveling in the moment. "Can't wait to tell my grandkids I was here!" she wrote, and inside the Senate chamber, she was photographed holding a "Members only" sign.

"I will never be the same girl again," the University of Kentucky student said through tears. "This has changed me completely."

After the riot, she dug in on social media when she was criticized for her actions, before eventually deleting her accounts. Courtright is among the youngest of those charged in the Capitol riot so far.

Her attorney on Friday argued she had no idea what she was doing and that she wasn't a political activist — she didn't even vote in the election she was there to protest. The judge seized on that during his remarks.

"That is your choice obviously, but in my view — if any citizen wants to participate in our democracy, casting a vote is the price of admission," he said. "Because when you do that, you have to study the issues and the candidates, learn what their policies are, figure out how those policies are affecting your community."

Participating in a democracy isn't like going to a University of Kentucky game and "rooting for a team just because of the color of their jerseys," the judge said. "It's certainly not resorting to violence when your team doesn't win the game," he told Courtright.

Cooper also noted that Courtright made it to the floor of the U.S. Senate at about the exact time that Ashli Babbitt, on the House, side was shot dead.

"Do you know how many people died on Jan. 6, 5. Including Ms. Babbitt?" he asked. "Five."

"Do you know how many Capitol police officers committed suicide after Jan. 6, harmed from the trauma of that day? Four," the judge added. "So was it cool to have been there?"

"No," she answered emphatically.

Still, the judge said the recommended six months in prison was too high and sentenced her instead to 30 days, one year of supervised release, and 60 hours of community service.

He said he hoped she could pull her life together and that she "should not be judged by the worst mistake you have made in your life."

Russia sets out tough demands for security pact with NATO

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV and LORNE COOK Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russia on Friday published draft security demands that NATO deny membership to Ukraine and other former Soviet countries and roll back the alliance's military deployments in Central and Eastern Europe — bold ultimatums that are almost certain to be rejected by the U.S. and its allies.

The proposals, which were submitted to the U.S. and its allies earlier this week, also call for a ban on sending U.S. and Russian warships and aircraft to areas from where they can strike each other's territory, along with a halt to NATO military drills near Russia.

The demand for a written guarantee that Ukraine won't be offered membership already has been rejected by the West, which said Moscow doesn't have a say in NATO's enlargement.

NATO's secretary-general emphasized Friday that any security talks with Moscow would need to take into account NATO concerns and involve Ukraine and other partners. The White House similarly said it's discussing the proposals with U.S. allies and partners, but noted that all countries have the right to determine their future without outside interference.

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The publication of the demands — contained in a proposed Russia-U.S. security treaty and a security agreement between Moscow and NATO — comes amid soaring tensions over a Russian troop buildup near Ukraine that has raised fears of an invasion. Moscow has denied it has plans to attack its neighbor but wants legal guarantees precluding NATO expansion and deploying weapons there.

Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said Russia's relations with the U.S. and NATO have approached a "dangerous point," noting that alliance deployments and drills near Russia have raised "unacceptable" threats to its security.

Moscow wants the U.S. to start talks immediately on the proposals in Geneva, he told reporters.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said the alliance had received the Russian documents, and noted that any dialogue with Moscow "would also need to address NATO's concerns about Russia's actions, be based on core principles and documents of European security, and take place in consultation with NATO's European partners, such as Ukraine."

He added that the 30 NATO countries "have made clear that should Russia take concrete steps to reduce tensions, we are prepared to work on strengthening confidence building measures."

White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan said the administration is ready to discuss Moscow's concerns about NATO in talks with Russian officials, but emphasized that Washington is committed to the "principle of nothing about you without you" in shaping policy that impacts European allies.

"We're approaching the broader question of diplomacy with Russia from the point of view that ... meaningful progress at the negotiating table, of course, will have to take place in a context of de-escalation rather than escalation," Sullivan said at the event hosted by the Council on Foreign Relations. He added "that it's very difficult to see agreements getting consummated if we're continuing to see an escalatory cycle."

While U.S. intelligence has determined that Russian President Vladimir Putin has made plans for a potential further invasion of Ukraine in early 2022, Sullivan said the U.S. still does not know whether he has decided to move forward.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki noted that strategic security talks with Moscow go back decades, saying that "there's no reason we can't do that moving forward to reduce instability, but we're going to do that in partnership and coordination with our European allies and partners."

"We will not compromise the key principles on which European security is built, including that all countries have the right to decide their own future and foreign policy free from the outside interference," Psaki said.

Moscow's draft also calls for efforts to reduce the risk of incidents involving Russia and NATO warships and aircraft, primarily in the Baltic and the Black seas, increase the transparency of military drills and other confidence-building measures.

A senior U.S. official said some of the Russian proposals are part of an arms control agenda between Moscow and Washington, while some other issues, such as transparency and deconfliction, concern all 57 members of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, including Ukraine and Georgia.

The official, who briefed reporters on the condition of anonymity in order to talk about the proposals, said the U.S. is looking at how to engage every country whose interests are affected in prospective talks on European security issues and will respond to Moscow sometime next week with concrete proposals after consulting with the allies.

President Vladimir Putin raised the demand for security guarantees in last week's video call with U.S. President Joe Biden. During the conversation, Biden voiced concern about a buildup of Russian troops near Ukraine and warned him that Russia would face "severe consequences" if Moscow attacked its neighbor.

Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in 2014 and shortly after cast its support behind a separatist rebellion in the country's east. More than seven years of fighting has killed over 14,000 people and devastated Ukraine's industrial heartland, known as the Donbas.

The Russian demands would oblige Washington and its allies to pledge to halt NATO's eastward expansion to include other ex-Soviet republics and rescind a 2008 promise of membership to Ukraine and Georgia. The alliance already has firmly rejected that demand from Moscow.

Moscow's documents also would preclude the U.S. and other NATO allies from conducting any military activities in Ukraine, other countries of Eastern Europe and ex-Soviet republics in the Caucasus and in

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Central Asia.

The Ukrainian Foreign Ministry commented on Moscow's proposals by emphasizing that it's up to the alliance and Ukraine to discuss NATO membership prospects and its military cooperation with other countries.

"The Russian aggression and the current Russian escalation along the Ukrainian border and on the occupied territories is now the main problem for the Euro-Atlantic security," said its spokesman Oleg Nikolenko.

The Russian proposal also ups the ante by putting a new demand to roll back NATO military deployments in Central and Eastern Europe, stating that the parties agree not to send any troops to areas where they hadn't been present in 1997 — before NATO's eastward expansion started — except for exceptional situations of mutual consent.

Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic joined NATO in 1999, followed in 2004 by Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and the former Soviet republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. In the following years, Albania, Croatia, Montenegro and North Macedonia also became members, bringing NATO membership to 30 nations.

The draft proposals contain a ban on the deployment of U.S. and Russian warships and aircraft to "areas where they can strike targets on the territory of the other party."

Moscow has long complained about patrol flights by U.S. strategic bombers near Russia's borders and the deployment of U.S. and NATO warships to the Black Sea, describing them as destabilizing and provocative.

Russia's draft envisages a pledge not to station intermediate-range missiles in areas where they can strike the other party's territory, a clause that follows the U.S. and Russian withdrawal from a Cold War-era pact banning such weapons.

The Russian draft also calls for a ban on the deployment of U.S. and Russian nuclear weapons on the territory of other countries — a repeat of Moscow's longtime push for the U.S. to withdraw its nuclear weapons from Europe.

Dmitri Trenin, the director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, noted that the publication of the Russian demands signals that the Kremlin considers their acceptance by the West unlikely.

"This logically means that Russia will have to assure its security single-handedly" using military-technical means, he said on Twitter.

Cook reported from Brussels. Darlene Superville, Ellen Knickmeyer and Aamer Madhani in Washington and Yuras Karmanau in Kyiv, Ukraine, contributed.

French minister says Macron's reelection would boost growth

By IAN PHILLIPS and SYLVIE CORBET undefined

NEW YORK (AP) — French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire says President Emmanuel Macron's potential reelection next year is "very important" to further boost growth — in a clear endorsement of a candidacy that's not yet been formally announced.

Macron is widely expected to seek a second term in the presidential election scheduled for April, but hasn't officially revealed his intentions.

In an interview with the Associated Press Friday during a two-day visit to the United States, Le Maire said: "I think it's very important that Emmanuel Macron is reelected. I think our country needs consistency and stability."

Polls for months have shown Macron, a pro-business centrist, to be the front-runner in next year's presidential election, where he's set to face major contenders from the right and the far-right.

"We must have a democratic, serene debate with (far-right candidate) Eric Zemmour, with other far-right leaders, to say: 'Your vision of France is not my vision of France,'" Le Maire said, noting that boosting growth is one response to the concerns expressed by the French.

Since Macron's election in May 2017, "we had some successes, we also had some failures," Le Maire said. "We failed to implement the pension reform. That's a regret because it was needed. We were not able to do it. We'll do it in the next term."

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Protracted, intense street protests and the COVID-19 pandemic led Macron to delay the difficult overhauling of France's pension system, which had been a key campaign promise.

"When you look at (Macron's) five-year term ... France is in the right direction, it is on the path to success," Le Maire added, noting that the French government passed measures to make the labor market more flexible, and cut taxes on businesses.

"This is a key point I want to tell all investors: France has become the most attractive country in Europe," he insisted.

France has scheduled to further cut its corporate tax from over 33% five years ago to 25% next year, he said. "So I'm telling all American entrepreneurs: come to France, this is the place to be."

In a long interview broadcast on national television on Wednesday, Macron said France has a "much stronger economy" despite going through the COVID-19 crisis. France's unemployment rate is at 8.1%, down from about 10% when he was elected, according to national statistics agency INSEE.

INSEE estimated the French economy would grow 6.7% this year, the highest rate since 1969.

Asked about French views about how to face global competition from China, Le Maire said "we are all aware that the rise of China is a major concern ... Then you have to define your strategy. Either to confront China — this is the American choice — or to engage with China. This is the French, and, I would say, the European choice."

"For the biggest challenges of the 21st century you need China," he said, also citing a new global taxation system, global agreement on reduction of debt for poor countries, and US-China agreement on fighting climate change.

Macron last week said he does not support a diplomatic boycott of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympic Games, in contrast with the U.S., Canada and U.K. which made the decision to protest human rights abuses in China.

"There are important problems related to human rights" in China, Le Maire acknowledged. "Our strategy is to divide the problems and to talk to China in a very frank manner."

"We are talking to China on human rights, we are talking on trade, we are talking about intellectual property, about access to markets about technological issues," he listed. "I think a step by step approach ... is the best one to get some very concrete results."

Corbet contributed from Paris.

Pfizer tests extra COVID shot for kids under 5 in setback

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

Pfizer said Friday it was changing plans and testing three doses of its COVID-19 vaccine in babies and preschoolers after the usual two shots didn't appear strong enough for some of the children.

Pfizer announced the change after a preliminary analysis found 2- to 4-year-olds didn't have as strong an immune response as expected to the very low-dose shots the company is testing in the youngest children.

It's disappointing news for families anxious to vaccinate their tots. Pfizer had expected data on how well the vaccines were working in children under 5 by year's end, and it's not clear how long the change will delay a final answer.

Pfizer and its partner BioNTech said if the three-dose study is successful, they plan to apply for emergency authorization sometime in the first half of 2022.

A kid-sized version of Pfizer's vaccine already is available for 5- to 11-year-olds, one that's a third of the dose given to everyone else 12 and older.

For children younger than 5, Pfizer is testing an even smaller dose, just 3 micrograms or a tenth of the adult dose.

Researchers analyzed a subset of youngsters in the study a month after their second dose to see if the tots developed levels of virus-fighting antibodies that were similar to teens and young adults who get the regular shots.

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The very low-dose shots appeared to work in youngsters under age 2, who produced similar antibody levels. But the immune response in 2- to 4-year-olds was lower than the study required, Pfizer vaccine research chief Kathrin Jansen said Friday in a call with investors.

Rather than trying a higher-dose shot for the preschoolers, Pfizer decided to expand the study to evaluate three of the very low-dose shots in all the study participants — from 6 months up to age 5. That third shot will come at least two months after the youngsters' second dose.

No safety concerns have been spotted in the study, the companies said.

Jansen cited other data showing a booster shot for people 16 and older restores strong protection, a jump in immunity that scientists hope also will help fend off the new omicron variant.

The companies also are preparing to test a booster for 5- to 11-year-olds, who are just now getting their two-dose vaccinations. And they are testing different dose options for teen boosters.

Jansen said if the additional pediatric testing is successful, "we would have a consistent three-dose vaccine approach for all ages."

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Since 1980s US chances of a white Christmas melt a bit

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

A white Christmas seems to be slowly morphing from a reliable reality to a dream of snowy holidays past for large swaths of the United States in recent decades.

Analysis of 40 years of December 25 U.S. snow measurements shows that less of the country now has snow for Christmas than in the 1980s.

That's especially true in a belt across the nation's midsection — from Baltimore to Denver and a few hundred miles farther north. And snow that falls doesn't measure up to past depths.

Scientists say the decline in the number of white Christmases is relatively small and caution about drawing conclusions. But it's noticeable and matters mightily to some people like George Holland.

The retired Dubuque, Iowa, educator known for his front yard nativity scenes said snow on Christmas is supposed to be part of the holiday: "The one that makes my heart warm is after going to midnight Mass and coming outside and it's snowing."

But the weather in Dubuque hasn't cooperated in recent years. "We don't have white Christmas," said boutique owner Bill Kaesbauer. "We haven't had any in years."

The last one was in 2017 in Dubuque, which weather records show used to have white Christmases nearly two out of three years.

The average December temperature in the continental U.S. was a tad below freezing from 1981 to 1990, federal weather records show. And from 2011 to 2020, it was up to an average slightly above 35 degrees (just under 2 degrees Celsius), considerably above the freezing mark.

But what did that warming trend, natural weather variability and a western megadrought mean to white Christmases?

From 1981 to 1990, on average, almost 47% of the country had snow on the ground Christmas Day, with an average depth of 3.5 inches (8.8 centimeters), according to an analysis of ground observation data by the University of Arizona for The Associated Press. From 2011 to 2020, Christmas snow cover was down to 38%, with an average depth of 2.7 inches (6.8 centimeters).

The change was particularly pronounced in a swath from about the Mason-Dixon line to just north of Detroit, Chicago, and Nebraska. The Christmas snow cover average there went from nearly 55% in the 1980s to slightly above 41% now, the Arizona data shows. Average snow depth fell from 3.5 inches (8.8 centimeters) to 2.4 inches (6 centimeters).

The numbers are small enough that it's difficult to tell whether this is a meaningful trend and, if so, whether climate change or natural weather variability is the cause, said University of Arizona atmospheric

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scientist Xubin Zeng, who ran the data.

Still, Zeng, who has published studies on decreasing snowpack in the western U.S. being connected to climate change, said the downward slide of white Christmases is consistent with global warming.

In 20 to 30 years "with climate warming, the prospects of a white Christmas in many parts of the U.S.A. will be slim indeed," said Mark Serreze, director of the National Snow and Ice Data Center in Boulder, Colorado.

A separate analysis by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration looks at "climate normals" — 30-year periods for about 5,000 weather stations across the lower 48 states. Comparing normals for 1981-2010 to normals for 1991-2020 shows more stations are seeing statistical odds for a white Christmas shrink, but the agency cautions against drawing a conclusion about any trend.

In much of Iowa and eastern Washington, the changes are bigger than elsewhere, according to NOAA. From 1981 to 2010, Dubuque's chance for a white Christmas was 63% but it's now down to 42%. Walla Walla, Washington's chance of getting a white Christmas dropped in half from 19% in 1981 to 2010 to 9.5% now.

Denver's airport station went from 40% chance of Christmas snow from 1981 to 2010 to 34%. Chicago, St. Louis, Kansas City, Salt Lake City, Milwaukee, Fort Wayne, Topeka, Des Moines, Akron, Albany, Olympia, Rapid City, and Oklahoma City airports saw drops of three or four percentage points.

The line where there's at least a 10% chance for a white Christmas moved noticeably north with the new normals, said NOAA climate scientist Imke Durre. And the nation's capital went from 10% to 7%.

"The movement of that line is consistent with a warmer December," Durre said.

New York, Philadelphia and Concord, New Hampshire, recorded small increases in chances of Christmas snow on the ground.

A data set from Rutgers University's global snow lab finds continental U.S. snow in the last week of December slightly increasing, not decreasing, said climate scientist David Robinson, whose data based on satellite imagery goes back to 1966.

"There's no trend. You just don't see it," Robinson said.

Often people in their 60s and 70s think there are fewer white Christmases, he added, because the 1960s had more than usual white Christmases.

Temperature alters snowfall in two different ways. In warmer borderline areas, warmer air turns snow into rain. But in cooler more northern areas where even higher temperatures are still below freezing, warmer temperatures mean more snow because warmer air holds more moisture, which comes down as snow, meteorologists said.

Several meteorologists cautioned about finding trends in complex data where both precipitation and temperature are factors. But despite those issues, fewer white Christmases seems associated with warmer temperatures from climate change, said Northern Illinois University meteorology professor Victor Gensini.

"It matters for many as an emotional weight of how the season ought to feel or how we think it ought to feel," National Snow and Ice Data scientist Twila Moon said. "But the climate scientist in me is also very interested in having a white Christmas because it's an indicator of how much and what type of precipitation we've gotten. And that is also really important because so much of our country is dealing with extreme drought right now."

In Helena, Montana, "it definitely feels like we don't have as much snow or the winters are different," said Shawn Whyte on Tuesday as the high hit 52 (11 Celsius). "I'm looking out my window right now and I have a lovely view of the entire hill in a valley and it is brown. It's ugly and brown.

"For us here, we expect winter and cold and it makes you feel snuggly and cozy," said Whyte, an information technology manager who said she's having trouble getting her Christmas spirit with no snow.

Maybe, she said, if she just goes caroling it will be like a Hallmark movie and the Christmas snow will come at the last minute.

This story has been corrected to show that the the last white Christmas in Dubuque was in 2017, not 2010.

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

Follow Seth Borenstein on Twitter at @borenbears

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Can you safely enjoy the holidays? Experts offer COVID tips

By CARLA K. JOHNSON AP Medical Writer

The delta and omicron variants of the coronavirus are trying to spoil the holiday spirit, but there still are ways to enjoy the festivities.

The explosive spread of the omicron variant is causing many to wonder if they should cancel their holiday plans. The omicron mutation is expected to overtake the delta variant in the United States within weeks.

Health experts know that people need to spend time together, so they are offering advice. Above all, getting vaccinated remains the best defense and getting a booster shot further increases protection.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's top infectious disease expert, skipped gathering for the holidays last year with his three adult daughters. But this year, Fauci, his wife and his daughters are all vaccinated with boosters, and they plan to spend the holidays together, even seeing a few friends who also are vaccinated and boosted.

"We can feel safe," Fauci said this week on NBC's "Nightly News." "Nothing is 100% risk-free."

A look at strategies to enjoy the holidays as safely as possible.

IS IT SAFE TO ATTEND A HOLIDAY PARTY?

It depends. Large parties aren't as safe as small ones. Indoor parties aren't as safe as outdoor gatherings. At a large, indoor party, one person without a mask can result in many people infected, said Dr. Celine Gounder of the NYU Grossman School of Medicine.

"Some of these are turning into superspreader events," Gounder said.

Even if everyone is vaccinated and boosted, breakthrough infections can happen, including with omicron, which has shown the ability to sidestep the protection of vaccination in lab tests.

And don't count on symptoms to tell you who's carrying the virus, said Dr. Jeff Duchin, health officer in Seattle and King County.

"Half or more of infections are spread from people before they have symptoms, so symptom screening remains important, but doesn't identify everyone who can spread COVID-19," Duchin said.

Masks, opening windows, running an air purifier with a HEPA filter are strategies recommended by health experts for gatherings during the holidays.

WHAT ABOUT HOME TEST KITS?

Home test kits can add a layer of safety by providing on-the-spot results. The tests are not as accurate as the PCR tests done in hospitals and at testing sites. But they have the advantage of giving results within minutes instead of days.

In some places, testing demand is high, rapid tests are hard to find and waits at testing centers are long.

If you're searching for a home test kit, check online and at drugstores. A box with two tests typically costs about \$25. If you have health insurance, save your receipt. You may be able to get reimbursed for the cost next year, although it's unclear whether new rules about that will be retroactive.

Residents of some parts of the U.S. can receive free home test kits through a public health effort called Say Yes! COVID Test.

"It's been a phenomenal program," said Matt Schanz, administrator of the Northeast Tri County Health District in northeastern Washington state, where households can get up to eight tests delivered.

"We're social people. We want to gather together and have joyous times during the holiday," Schanz said.

Some health experts are recommending testing twice: Take a test three days before and on the day of

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a holiday gathering.

"So if you're gathering Christmas Eve, test a few days before and on Christmas Eve as well," said Dr. Kiran Joshi, senior medical officer at the Cook County Department of Public Health in Illinois.

WHAT ABOUT TRAVEL?

Check the rules of your destination country if you're planning to travel abroad. Nations are adding new rules in response to omicron.

People traveling by air should be extra careful about wearing masks in crowded airports, Fauci said.

"Wear your mask all the time," Fauci told a Wall Street Journal podcast. "It will be required to wear a mask when you're on the plane, but don't get careless in the airport with all the crowds that are in the airport and take your mask off."

IS THERE ANY GOOD NEWS?

Kids often catch viruses at school and there's some evidence with flu that school breaks can slow the spread. So it might be lucky that omicron is emerging during the holidays, said virus expert Elodie Ghedin of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.

"Going into the holidays where kids are staying home from school is actually a good thing," Ghedin said. "If this had occurred in the fall, it probably would have been worse with transmission. That's the one silver lining going into the holidays."

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NOT REAL NEWS: A look at what didn't happen this week

The Associated Press undefined

A roundup of some of the most popular but completely untrue stories and visuals of the week. None of these are legit, even though they were shared widely on social media. The Associated Press checked them out. Here are the facts:

Vaccinated people aren't nine times more likely to be hospitalized

CLAIM: People who are vaccinated against COVID-19 are nine times more likely to be hospitalized than those who are unvaccinated.

THE FACTS: The false assertion that vaccinated people are more likely to be hospitalized is based on one former physician assistant's claim that 90% of all patients admitted to her hospital during a recent period were vaccinated against COVID-19. But the hospital records show the vaccination rate was far lower and there was no evidence of any connection between vaccination status and the various illnesses that led to the hospitalizations. A post circulating on Instagram last month cites a blog post by a lawyer representing Deborah Conrad, a former physician's assistant at United Memorial Medical Center in Batavia, New York, to falsely claim that people are "9x more likely to be hospitalized if they are vaccinated over unvaccinated patients." Conrad wrote to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Food and Drug Administration earlier this year warning of possible "serious injuries from COVID-19 vaccines." In the blog post, it notes that Conrad saw the number of patients in the hospital had "increased dramatically" and claimed that 90% of them were vaccinated against COVID. The hospital disputes her figures. Conrad provides no information for when the patients she reported were hospitalized, and her spokespeople declined to clarify. Her letter was sent in July 2021, and in it, she claims to have alerted the FDA of her concerns in April and May. Hospital records show that in July, just 60% of the facility's inpatients had received the vaccine, according to Rochester Regional Health spokesperson Jillian Parker. In early April, 15% of hospital patients were vaccinated. And on May 24, 25% of the hospital patients were vaccinated. Conrad also argued that she found an increase in various illnesses — including blood clots, Bell's palsy, pneumonia and strokes — after the initial roll out of the COVID-19 vaccine. She logged these in VAERS, or the Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System, which allows anyone to submit reports. But VAERS reports are not

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verified and do not prove that the illnesses are connected to the vaccine. In a response to The Associated Press, Conrad's legal team acknowledged that she "did not speculate on causation and only did what she was obligated to do: report to VAERS any adverse event following vaccination that led to hospitalization." No doctors or experts at the hospital raised the same concerns about a rise of these illnesses, Parker said. Parker acknowledged that admissions had gone up at the time, but said the hospital attributed the rise to other factors, including patients deferring care during the height of the COVID pandemic, or scheduling elective surgery that was put off. Conrad's lawyer said she "stands by her observations and her reporting." Several experts told the AP that studies have shown serious side effects from the vaccine to be rare. And many of the illnesses Conrad listed — including Bell's palsy, pneumonia and strokes — are not known side effects of the shots, they said. "The vaccine is not causing all of these conditions that she's concerned about," said Dr. Melanie Swift, the associate medical director for occupational health service at the Mayo Clinic. As more of the country is vaccinated, the community's vaccination rate will be reflected in hospitals' patients, she explained. Blood clots have been one of the rare side effects of the vaccine and the Johnson & Johnson vaccine was briefly paused in 2020 over those concerns. But federal regulators allowed the shots to resume less than two weeks later after the risk was found to be rare.

— Associated Press writer Karena Phan in Santa Maria, California, contributed this report.

Queensland is not punishing unvaccinated people for coughing in public

CLAIM: Australia is punishing unvaccinated people who cough or sneeze in public with fines and jail time.

THE FACTS: Authorities in Queensland, Australia, are not punishing unvaccinated people who cough or sneeze in public. However, people who intentionally spit, cough or sneeze on public officials or workers, or threaten to do so, face fines and jail time under an April 2020 public health order issued amid the COVID-19 pandemic. In December 2021, Queensland officials announced that the policy, which applies to both vaccinated and unvaccinated people, would be expanded to include more types of workers. Inaccurate claims regarding the directive have since circulated widely on social media. One erroneous tweet posted Sunday falsely claimed that "from the 17th of December, The Unvaccinated will be fined up to \$13,000 or 6 months in prison, for offences such as sneezing or coughing in public." The claims leave out the fact that the policy, which isn't new, only applies to deliberate acts of sneezing, coughing, or spitting on public officials or workers, as well as threats to do so, according to Queensland officials. "These measures aren't targeting unvaccinated people. If you go into a retail store or a coffee shop or anywhere and deliberately cough on someone with the intent of causing fear, it doesn't matter if you're vaccinated or not, you're causing an offense," a spokesperson for Queensland Health told The Associated Press. Earlier this month, Queensland officials announced that they would relax COVID-19 measures for businesses and add a variety of new restrictions for unvaccinated people. As part of the new measures, the existing policy regarding intentional coughing, sneezing, or spitting will be expanded to include such deliberate acts against hospitality workers. Violating the directive is punishable by fines up to \$13,785 or a maximum of six months imprisonment. The policy covers workers while they are at their place of work and during their commutes to and from work. The current directive states that there are "increasing reports of people intentionally spitting at or coughing or sneezing on public officials and workers during the COVID-19 declared public health emergency." During a Dec. 7 press conference, Yvette D'Ath, the Queensland minister for health and ambulance services, said that the measure was intended to "protect" workers from "appalling behavior" while they were just trying to do their jobs.

— Associated Press writer Josh Keley in Phoenix contributed this report.

Santa wasn't arrested for mask violation at German market

CLAIM: Santa was arrested at a Christmas market in Germany because he wasn't wearing a mask.

THE FACTS: A man in a Santa costume was detained by police at a Christmas market in Stralsund, Germany, but police said it was because he refused to show identification at an unregistered protest against vaccine mandates, not because he wasn't wearing a mask. A video circulating on Twitter shows a man

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dressed like Santa being escorted out of a Christmas market in Germany. The video is accompanied by claims on social media saying he refused to wear a mask. A statement issued by the Stralsund Police said that authorities responded late Monday to a report of an unregistered gathering at the 'Old Market' square in Stralsund, where about 65 people had gathered and "appeared to be voicing their opinion on the current coronavirus measures and a vaccine mandate." Parliament last week approved compulsory vaccinations for health care professionals, but a general vaccine mandate isn't in force. Officers asked participants to show their IDs, noting that the gathering wasn't registered and therefore constituted a criminal offense for the organizer. The man dressed as Santa, who wasn't working at the Christmas market, refused to provide his name to officers, according to the report, and pulled away as police escorted him out. The police statement said a complaint was made against the 47-year-old local man "on suspicion of resisting law enforcement officers," among other allegations. He was released by police that evening after being identified. The incident is similar to another case elsewhere in Germany this month. A video claimed to show an elderly woman being detained by police because she didn't have a vaccine passport. However, police said the woman, 80, was being briefly detained during an unauthorized protest because she did not provide German authorities with identification. Witnesses confirmed the police account. According to authorities, only IDs were checked on the scene, not vaccination passports.

— Associated Press writers Frank Jordans in Berlin and Phan contributed this report.

Clips show 2020 protests in France, not anti-vaccine rallies

CLAIM: Video shows people rioting against vaccine mandates in France.

THE FACTS: The videos recently posted on social media show scenes from November 2020 protests against a security law in France that would restrict the filming of police officers, not an anti-vaccine demonstration. The widely shared video pieced together two clips taken by separate people during the 2020 protests in Paris to make the false claim that the footage is from 2021. The video shows protesters clashing with police while surrounded by clouds of tear gas. "Horror in France as vaccine mandate riot sees protesters beaten by armed police - WATCH," a Twitter post stated. "Looks like the French police are losing," wrote another. But the clips were first posted on social media in November 2020, when dozens of rallies took place against an initial provision in the law that would make it illegal to publish photos or video of on-duty police officers with harmful intent, The Associated Press reported at the time. The miscaptioned video in the Twitter post uses two separate clips from the protests. The first 40 seconds of the post came from a Facebook live stream recorded on Nov. 28, 2020, by Vécu, a French media outlet. It shows rioting near Bastille Majestic Cinema Paris, which is visible in the background. The footage in the second portion of the video from 0:40 to 1:21 showing rioters attacking police was taken by French journalist Amar Taoualit, and features a watermark with his Twitter handle @Taoualitamar. Taoualit confirmed to the AP that he filmed the material second portion of the video on Nov. 28, 2020, during demonstrations against the security law.

— Associated Press writer Arijeta Lajka in New York contributed this report.

Fox News is not banned in Canada or the UK

CLAIM: Canada and the U.K. both banned Fox News.

THE FACTS: Neither Canada nor the U.K. has banned Fox News. The network remains authorized for distribution in Canada and it voluntarily pulled itself from U.K. airwaves in 2017. A widely shared tweet purporting to share a "FUN FACT," falsely claimed that the two major U.S. allies had permanently banned the television channel. However, the claim isn't a "fact" at all. Instead, it parrots a false narrative that has circulated online for years. Fox News is currently authorized for distribution in Canada, said Isabella Maestri, a spokesperson for Canada's broadcasting regulator, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission. The channel is featured on a public list of non-Canadian services and stations that are greenlit for distribution in Canada, accessible on the CRTC's website. Being on that list means that a Canadian television provider is authorized to distribute the service, Maestri told the AP in an email. The

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Canadian Cable Television Association first sought permission to broadcast Fox News and several other non-Canadian networks in the country in 2003, according to an archived letter on the CRTC's website. The CRTC rejected that request, citing concerns about competitiveness and a need for more information. A year later, in 2004, the CRTC approved Fox News for distribution. The AP has previously debunked the claim that the U.K. banned Fox News. According to both Fox News and U.K. officials, U.K. regulators never banned the channel from operating in the region. Instead, Fox News voluntarily stopped broadcasting in the U.K. in 2017 due to the channel's low viewership there.

Stone says he invoked 5th amendment at Jan. 6 deposition

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Longtime Trump confidant Roger Stone says he has asserted his Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination in an interview with the House panel investigating the Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection.

Stone -- who was convicted in 2019 of lying to Congress, but subsequently pardoned by Trump -- told reporters as he left the deposition Friday that "I did my civic duty and I responded as required by law" but that he invoked his Fifth Amendment rights to every question.

The committee subpoenaed Stone last month, noting that he spoke at rallies on the day before the insurrection and used members of a far-right extremist group, the Oath Keepers, as personal security guards while he was in Washington. Several members of that militia group broke into the Capitol on Jan. 6, along with hundreds of other supporters of former President Donald Trump, and have been charged with conspiring to block the certification of the vote.

Stone is one of several in Trump's inner circle who have refused to answer questions from the committee. The House has already held two of Trump's top allies — Steve Bannon and former White House chief of staff Mark Meadows — in contempt for not cooperating. But many more witnesses have cooperated. The panel has done around 300 interviews as it seeks to create a comprehensive record of the attack.

It is unclear if the panel will vote to hold Stone in contempt. The committee's leaders have said that they believe witnesses asserting Fifth Amendment rights should be doing so to avoid self-incrimination. Stone told reporters afterward that he did not believe he did anything wrong, but that he asserted the Fifth because he believes Democrats will conspire against him.

A spokesman for the panel did not have immediate comment on Stone.

Stone was convicted in special counsel Robert Mueller's Russia investigation of lying to Congress about his efforts to gather inside information about Russia-hacked Democratic emails that were published by WikiLeaks in the run-up to the 2016 presidential election. Trump pardoned him in his final weeks in office.

TikTok posts referencing violence raise anxiety at schools

By KANTELE FRANKO and MATT O'BRIEN Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — Some parents kept their children home, police stepped up patrols and educators tightened security protocols Friday in response to viral TikTok posts alluding to unconfirmed threats of violence that raised anxiety levels at schools nationwide.

Vickie Cartwright, the interim superintendent of schools in Broward County, Florida, one of the nation's largest school districts, said the U.S. government should take action if TikTok won't get rid of dangerous posts that hurt American schools.

"I'm asking for our federal government at this point in time to intervene. We need help. I cannot fathom that any other country would allow this type of attack to be occurring on their education system," she said.

With stress levels already soaring from the effects of the pandemic and a rash of hoax threats following a deadly school shooting in Michigan on Nov. 30, districts said they were taking precautions out of an abundance of caution.

The posts circulating online said schools would face shooting and bomb threats Friday. In a tweet, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security said it did not "have any information indicating any specific, cred-

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ible threats to schools but recommends communities remain alert.”

Some districts opted to cancel classes for the day or limit where students could go inside school buildings. Many others increased security staffing. More than a half dozen school districts in the Houston area told middle and high school students to leave their backpacks at home Friday in response to the TikTok posts, though none of the districts had received credible threats, officials said.

TikTok has been deleting posts spreading “misinformation that is generally sparking alarming warnings” but is not finding posts that are promoting violence or making threats, company spokesperson Hilary McQuaide said.

“We are removing the alarmist warnings,” she said. “Those are misinformation.”

McQuaide said the company began hearing the rumors late Wednesday and has been working with law enforcement agencies to try to get to the bottom of them.

The post most widely associated with Friday’s fears is “not really a threat, it’s just saying they are hearing this thing is happening,” said Justin Patchin, a criminal justice professor at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire and co-director of the Cyberbullying Research Center.

How to respond to that presents a dilemma both to TikTok and educators, especially since many of the previous panics about TikTok challenges have proven to be bogus and acknowledging them can make them more influential.

“It definitely puts schools in a tough spot,” said Patchin, whose center has worked with TikTok and other social media companies in the past to research online bullying. “There are these potential threats they can’t ignore but they also can’t shut down schools every time someone posts a generalized threat on social media.”

Educators have been on edge in many places since the deadly shooting in Michigan as copycat threats have led to isolated cases of schools switching to remote learning over the last several weeks.

In Newtown, Connecticut, all schools were open Friday, with an increased police presence. District schools had switched to remote learning Tuesday, the ninth anniversary of the Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre, due in part to threats that schools elsewhere were receiving in the aftermath of the Michigan shooting.

In Michigan, West Bloomfield schools went remote for the entire week after a social media threat prompted a lockdown Monday. The 14-year-old daughter of Julia Anderson Pulver texted her saying it was probably nothing but “there’s still a little voice in the back of my head saying you’re gonna die.”

“I was very pleased they wanted to ensure the mental health of our students and teachers and staff because they didn’t want us to come back and then go through a similar lockdown because a new threat came in and repeatedly traumatize everyone,” Pulver said.

As her 15-year-old son studied for his big algebra test, word of vague threats of school violence on TikTok prompted Kelley Swiney to quiz the freshman about other calculations: What’s your fastest exit from that classroom? Where would you run? Do you feel safe going to school Friday?

Swiney, a mom of three school-age boys in Upper Arlington, Ohio, said she’d had a similar conversation with him and her middle son, a sixth-grader, after the recent school shooting in Michigan. She asked them to take a few seconds in each classroom they enter to think about where they could hide and how they could get out.

She told her son that if he felt truly unsafe – not just trying to skip the test or the last day before holiday break – he could stay home Friday, even if it meant a failing grade.

“I think it’s really pretty depressing that we live in a world where I have to have that conversation with my child,” Swiney said.

On Friday morning, he felt comfortable enough to head to school for the exam, and by midday he was safely back home.

O’Brien reported from Providence, Rhode Island. Associated Press writer Anna Liz Nichols in Lansing, Michigan, contributed to this report.

Far-right using COVID-19 theories to grow reach, study shows

By DAVID KLEPPER and LORI HINNANT Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — The mugshot-style photos are posted on online message boards in black and white and look a little like old-fashioned “wanted” posters.

“The Jews own COVID just like all of Hollywood,” the accompanying text says. “Wake up people.”

The post is one of many that white supremacists and far-right extremists are using to expand their reach and recruit followers on the social media platform Telegram, according to the findings of researchers who sifted through nearly half a million comments on pages — called channels on Telegram — that they categorized as far-right from January 2020 to June 2021.

The tactic has been successful: Nine of the 10 most viewed posts in the sample examined by the researchers contained misleading claims about the safety of vaccines or the pharmaceutical companies manufacturing them. One Telegram channel saw its total subscribers jump tenfold after it leaned into COVID-19 conspiracy theories.

“COVID-19 has served as a catalyst for radicalization,” said the study’s author, Ciaran O’Connor, an analyst at the London-based Institute for Strategic Dialogue. “It allows conspiracy theorists or extremists to create simple narratives, framing it as us versus them, good versus evil.”

Other posts downplayed the severity of the coronavirus or pushed conspiracy theories about its origins. Many of the posts contain hate speech directed at Jews, Asians, women or other groups or violent rhetoric that would be automatically removed from Facebook or Twitter for violating the standards of those sites.

Telegram, based in the United Arab Emirates, has many different kinds of users around the world, but it has become a favorite tool of some on the far-right in part because the platform lacks the content moderation of Facebook, Twitter and other platforms.

In a statement to The Associated Press, Telegram said it welcomed “the peaceful expression of ideas, including those we do not agree with.” The statement said moderators monitor activity and user reports “in order to remove public calls for violence.”

O’Connor said he believes the people behind these posts are trying to exploit fear and anxiety over COVID-19 to attract new recruits, whose loyalty may outlast the pandemic.

Indeed, mixed in with the COVID-19 conspiracy posts are some direct recruitment pitches. For example, someone posted a link to a news story about a Long Island, New York, synagogue on a channel popular with the far-right Proud Boys and added a message urging followers to join them. “Embrace who you were called to be,” read the post, which was accompanied by a swastika.

The researchers found suggestions that far-right groups on Telegram are working together. ISD researchers linked two usernames involved in running one Telegram channel to two prominent members of the American far-right. One was a scheduled speaker at the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, where a white supremacist deliberately drove into a crowd of counterdemonstrators, killing one and injuring 35.

That channel has grown steadily since the pandemic began and now has a reach of around 400,000 views each day, according to Telegram Analytics, a service that keeps statistical data on about 150,000 Telegram channels on the site TGStat. In May 2020 the channel had 5,000 subscribers; it now has 50,000.

The data is especially concerning given a rash of incidents around the world that indicate some extremists are moving from online rhetoric to offline action.

Gavin Yamey, a physician and public health professor at Duke University, has written about the rise of threats against health care workers during the pandemic. He said the harassment is even worse for those who are women, people of color, in a religious minority or LGBTQ.

Yamey, who is Jewish, has received threats and anti-Semitic messages, including one on Twitter calling for his family’ to be “executed.” He fears racist conspiracy theories and scapegoating may persist even after the pandemic eases.

“I worry that in some ways the genie is out of the bottle,” Yamey said.

The pandemic and the unrest it has caused have been linked to a wave of harassment and attacks on

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Asian-Americans. In Italy, a far-right opponents of vaccine mandates rampaged through a union headquarters and a hospital. In August in Hawaii, some of those who harassed that state's Jewish lieutenant governor at his home during a vaccine protest brandished fliers with his photo and the word "Jew."

Elsewhere, people have died after taking sham cures, pharmacists have destroyed vaccine vials, and others have damaged 5G telecommunication towers since the pandemic began nearly two years ago.

Events such as the pandemic leave many people feeling anxious and looking for explanations, according to Cynthia Miller-Idriss, director of the Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab at American University, which studies far-right extremism. Conspiracy theories can provide an artificial sense of control, she said.

"COVID-19 has created fertile ground for recruitment because so many people around the world feel unsettled," Miller-Idriss said. "These racist conspiracy theories give people a sense of control, a sense of power over events that make people feel powerless."

Policing extremism online has challenged tech companies that say they must balance protecting free speech with removing hate speech. They also must contend with increasingly sophisticated tactics by groups that have learned to evade platform rules.

Facebook this month announced that it had removed a network of accounts based in Italy and France that had spread conspiracy theories about vaccines and carried out coordinated harassment campaigns against journalists, doctors and public health officials.

The network, called V_V, used both real and fake accounts and was overseen by a group of users who coordinated their activities on Telegram in an effort to hide their tracks from Facebook, company investigators found.

"They sought to mass-harass individuals with pro-vaccination views into making their posts private or deleting them, essentially suppressing their voices," said Mike Dvilyanski, head of cyber espionage investigations at Meta, Facebook's parent company.

O'Connor, the ISD researcher, said sites like Telegram will continue to serve as a refuge for extremists as long as they lack the moderation policies of the larger platforms.

"The guardrails that you see on other platforms, they don't exist on Telegram," O'Connor said. "That makes it a very attractive place for extremists."

Klepper reported from Providence, R.I.

CDC endorses schools' coronavirus 'test-to-stay' policies

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — U.S. health officials are endorsing "test-to-stay" policies that allow close contacts of students infected with the coronavirus to remain in classrooms if they test negative.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention decided to more firmly embrace the approach, already used by many school districts, after research of such policies in the Chicago and Los Angeles areas found COVID-19 infections did not increase when using the approach.

"Test-to-stay is an encouraging public health practice to help keep our children in school," CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said on Friday.

CDC's official guidance for schools has been that when someone in a school tests positive for COVID-19 infection, those who were deemed to be in close contact should stay out of school, in home quarantine, for 10 days.

With the announcement Friday, the CDC is saying both test-to-stay programs and quarantining approaches are both equally good options for schools.

Hundreds of schools have adopted test-to-stay policies, and several states have funded statewide test-to-stay policies to prevent students from spending long stretches away from school.

Previously, the CDC said there is promise in the approach, as long as other measures such as masking for both teachers and students were followed.

CDC has been working with some school districts to evaluate the programs, and the agency released two studies that indicated they worked well.

One was in suburban Lake County, Illinois, just north of Chicago, which adopted a program in August. Close contacts were allowed to stay in school provided both the infected person and close contact were masked when an exposure might have happened, the close contact had no symptoms, and the close contact was tested one, three, five and seven days after exposure to the infected person.

Infections developed in only 16 of the more than 1,000 close contacts who were tracked, a transmission rate of about 1.5%. Health officials deemed it a successful approach that allowed many students to stay in school.

Similar results were reported in a similar study that looked at what happened this fall in schools in Los Angeles County, California. Researchers counted 7,511 student close contacts in schools that tried the strategy, and the secondary infection rate was 0.7%.

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Forbes editor says he testified before Trump grand jury

NEW YORK (AP) — The editor of Forbes magazine testified Thursday before the grand jury hearing evidence in a criminal investigation of former President Donald Trump and his business practices, answering questions about an article examining whether the former president inflated his wealth.

Forbes editor Randall Lane wrote in a post on the business magazine's website that he was questioned about articles he wrote in 2015 about Trump's fixation with his ranking on the magazine's annual list of wealthiest people.

Lane said deputy wealth editor Chase Peterson-Withorn also testified, briefly answering questions about a 2017 article he wrote about the size and value of Trump's apartment at Trump Tower.

Lane's disclosure is the clearest indication yet that Manhattan prosecutors investigating Trump are zeroing in on whether he committed fraud by exaggerating his wealth, not only to Forbes but to banks to secure more favorable loan terms.

The investigation has already led to tax fraud charges in June against Trump's company, the Trump Organization, and its longtime finance chief, Allen Weisselberg. They are accused of evading taxes on lucrative fringe benefits paid to executives.

Lane said he was questioned for about 20 minutes by Mark Pomerantz, a former mafia prosecutor assisting in the probe, and was asked to confirm various things, including the methodology of the magazine's list of richest Americans and Trump's statements in the article that "I look better if I'm worth \$10 billion than if I'm worth \$4 billion" and that a higher net worth "was good for financing."

Pomerantz also asked about Trump's claims, reported in the 2015 article, that his holdings in Trump Tower were worth five or six times more than the magazine's \$530 million estimate and that his apartment was worth at least twice the \$100 million that the magazine valued it at, Lane said. The editor said Peterson-Withorn testified for about five minutes and was asked specifically about Trump's claim that the apartment was 33,000 square feet.

Messages seeking comment were left with Trump's lawyer.

The Manhattan district attorney's office declined to comment.

In disclosing his testimony, Lane said he and Peterson-Withorn had been fighting subpoenas for their testimony since September, raising concerns that testifying about a news subject would erode their journalistic independence and have a chilling effect on sources who provide them with information.

Lane said the judge overseeing this grand jury limited the scope of their questioning to confirming the accuracy of the articles about Trump. Lane said everything he and Peterson-Withorn testified about had already been revealed in their articles, writing: "If we were sitting on anything newsworthy, we would have already shared that with our readers."

While grand jury proceedings are secret, there is nothing barring witnesses called before them from talking about their testimony.

Prosecutors started looking at how Trump and his company value their assets after Trump's longtime personal lawyer and fixer Michael Cohen told a congressional committee in 2019 that the developer-turned-politician had a habit of manipulating property values.

Cohen said Trump would inflate values to gain favorable loan terms and minimize them to reap tax benefits.

Cohen gave a Congressional committee copies of Trump's financial statements from 2011, 2012 and 2013 — statements he said Trump gave to his main lender, Deutsche Bank, to inquire about a loan to buy the NFL's Buffalo Bills, and to Forbes to substantiate his claim to a place on its list of the world's wealthiest people.

Trump "would go into a frenzy" when Forbes and Fortune were compiling their annual lists of the world's richest people and would have Cohen and longtime financial chief Allen Weisselberg inflate valuations to come up with an acceptable number, Cohen wrote in his memoir "Disloyal."

Lane wrote in his 2015 article that other real estate developers had told the magazine "slapping a high Forbes 400 estimate on a banker's desk can sometimes help secure bigger loans and better rates."

Pressure on PM Johnson after UK Tories suffer election upset

By DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservative Party has suffered a stunning defeat in a parliamentary by-election that was viewed as a referendum on his government amid weeks of scandal and soaring COVID-19 infections.

Liberal Democrat Helen Morgan overturned a Conservative majority of almost 23,000 votes from the last election to win Thursday's contest in North Shropshire, a rural area of northwest England that has been represented by a Conservative almost continuously since 1832. The election was called after the former Conservative member of Parliament resigned following allegations of improper lobbying.

The result will heap pressure on Johnson just two years after he was reelected with a seemingly unassailable 80-seat majority in the House of Commons. His authority has been dented in recent weeks by allegations that he and his staff attended Christmas parties last year while the country was in lockdown, efforts to shield his ally in the lobbying scandal and suggestions that he improperly accepted donations to fund the lavish refurbishment of his official residence.

Against this backdrop, supporters and opponents are questioning Johnson's handling of the pandemic after coronavirus infections soared to records this week as the highly transmissible omicron variant swept through the U.K.

"Tonight the people of North Shropshire have spoken on behalf of the British people," Morgan said in her victory speech. "They said loudly and clearly, 'Boris Johnson, the party is over. Your government, run on lies and bluster, will be held accountable. It will be scrutinized, it will be challenged, and it can and will be defeated.'"

Thursday's result is the second by-election defeat for the Conservatives this year. The Liberal Democrats, England's third-biggest party, in June won a by-election in Chesham and Amersham, a constituency northwest of London that had also been a traditional Conservative stronghold.

John Curtice, a pollster and professor of politics at the University of Strathclyde, said the Conservative defeat in North Shropshire was "pretty spectacular by historical standards," noting that the party's support plunged 34% from the previous election in 2019.

The only time the party suffered a bigger drop during a by-election was in 1993, when it was riven by internal division, he said. The Conservatives lost power to the Labour Party during the next general election in 1997.

"There is no doubting the size of this rebuff to the Conservatives and further evidence that the party has indeed now hit something of an electoral hole in the wake of those various scandals," Curtice told GB News.

But whether this decline in Conservative support will spell the end of Johnson's government is still unclear. Johnson is unlikely to resign any time soon, and ousting him would require support from Conservative

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lawmakers who want to hold on to their own seats in Parliament.

Johnson on Friday took responsibility for the defeat, saying the government's work in bolstering the National Health Service and rolling out booster vaccines had been obscured by headlines about "politics and politicians" that have little to do with everyday life.

"I totally understand people's frustrations ..." Johnson said at a vaccination center in London. "In all humility, I have got to accept that verdict. I understand that what voters want us as the government to be doing at all times is to focus on them and their priorities."

The U.K.'s next general election isn't scheduled to take place until May 2, 2024.

Johnson became prime minister almost 2½ years ago, riding his support for Brexit and his carefully curated image as a bumbling but likable politician.

He solidified his position by calling a snap election just five months later after Parliament rejected the withdrawal agreement he negotiated with the European Union. The Conservatives won 365 seats in the election, 80 more than all the other parties combined.

But Brexit is no longer the central issue in British politics.

Many voters are frustrated after two years of a pandemic that has claimed more than 145,000 lives, triggered a series of lockdowns and battered the economy.

Conservative lawmakers rebelled earlier this week, with 99 members of Johnson's party voting against his proposal to require proof of vaccination or a negative COVID-19 test to enter nightclubs and large events. The measure passed only because the opposition Labour Party supported it.

Then there are the scandals and missteps that have made Johnson look more like someone who has lost control than his preferred persona of a slightly disheveled leader who's so busy he can't be bothered to comb his hair.

He was forced to apologize last month after trying to change parliamentary rules to avoid censure for Conservative lawmaker Owen Paterson who lobbied government agencies on behalf of companies he worked for. Paterson eventually resigned, triggering the by-election in North Shropshire.

Since then Johnson has been buffeted by a series of news reports alleging that he and his staff attended Christmas parties last November and December at a time when COVID-19 restrictions barred everyone else from visiting friends or even comforting dying relatives in the hospital.

Johnson initially stonewalled, saying that there were no parties and no rules had been broken. After a video surfaced in which staff members appeared to make light of the violations Johnson was forced to call for an investigation.

Even some members of his own party have now had enough.

Roger Gale, a Conservative lawmaker since 1983, said the result in North Shropshire was a clear indication that the public is dissatisfied with the way Johnson is running the government.

"I think this has to be seen as a referendum on the prime minister's performance, and I think that the prime minister is now in last orders time," Gale told the BBC. He has "two strikes already. One earlier this week in the vote in the Commons, now this. One more strike and he's out."

Supply shortages and emboldened workers: A changed economy

By PAUL WISEMAN and DEE-ANN DURBIN AP Business Writers

Employees at a fast-food restaurant in Sacramento, California, exasperated over working in stifling heat for low wages, demanded more pay and a new air conditioner — and got both.

Customer orders poured in to an Italian auto supplier, which struggled to get hold of enough supplies of everything from plastic to microchips to meet the demand.

A drought in Taiwan magnified a worldwide shortage of computer chips, so vital to auto and electronics production.

The global economy hadn't experienced anything like this for decades. Maybe ever. After years in which ultra-low inflation had become a fixture of economies across the world, prices rocketed skyward in 2021 — at the grocery store, the gasoline pump, the used-car lot, the furniture store. Chalk it up to a surpris-

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ingly swift and robust economic recovery from the pandemic recession, one that left suppliers flat-footed and hampered by COVID-19 disruptions.

U.S. workers, having struggled for years to achieve economic gains, secured better wages, benefits and working conditions — and the confidence to quit their jobs if they didn't get them.

Global supply chains that ran efficiently for years broke down as factories, ports and freight yards buckled under the weight of surging orders.

Propelled by vast infusions of government aid and the widespread distribution of COVID vaccines, the economic bounce-back was as startling as the fall that had preceded it. Policymakers, business owners and economists were caught off-guard by both the speed of the recovery and the new COVID variants that threatened its durability.

They had never, after all, had to manage the unpredictable fallout, economic and otherwise, from a global pandemic.

BACK FROM THE BRINK

In the spring of 2020, the global economy appeared to stand on the brink of a catastrophe. The sudden and blindingly fast spread of COVID-19 infections forced lockdowns, frightened people into hunkering down at home, paralyzed travel and ordinary business activity and led employers to slash tens of millions of jobs.

In June that year, the International Monetary Fund predicted that the global economy would shrink 4.9% for the year, the first drop in worldwide economic output since the 2008-2009 financial crisis.

But the governments of the wealthiest nations, scarred by the achingly slow recovery from the financial crisis just over a decade earlier, poured money into rescuing their economies. The United States was particularly aggressive: It supplied \$5 trillion in COVID-related stimulus aid to individuals, businesses and municipalities this year and last.

"The U.S. has been a total outlier globally," said Robin Brooks, chief economist at the Institute of International Finance, a global trade group for financial companies.

"We had the deepest pocketbook of any country. We have this exorbitant privilege" — the ability to run up debts to pay for COVID relief without having to pay high interest rates to do so. Global investors regard U.S. government debt as perhaps the safest investment around; their purchases of U.S. bonds keep American interest rates low.

So despite immense federal spending and surging inflation, the yield on the benchmark 10-year Treasury note — below 1.4%, as of early Friday — remains lower than it was before the pandemic.

In the United States and elsewhere, stimulus aid is widely credited with helping stave off disaster. Though the global economy did shrink in 2020, it did so by a less-than-expected 3.1%. And the IMF expects growth to rebound to 5.9% for 2021. That would be the fastest calendar-year expansion in IMF records dating to 1980.

Beginning earlier this year, vaccines accelerated the return to something much closer to ordinary pre-pandemic life.

"We got this scientific miracle," said Jacob Kirkegaard, senior fellow with the German Marshall Fund of the United States. "We had a vaccine that was available six to nine months earlier than anybody had really believed in 2020 ... What that meant was that the second half of 2021 saw basically a general reopening in all of the advanced economies, and that was certainly was a massive positive surprise."

COVID UNCERTAINTY

Still, the virus itself has continued to complicate anyone's ability to forecast where the economy was headed or to determine what to do about it. A wave of infections over the summer, for instance, sent Japan's economy into a nasty tailspin: It shrank from July through September at a 3.6% annual rate.

Likewise, America's recovery lost momentum once the highly contagious delta variant erupted over the summer. Growth slowed to a 2.1% annual rate from July through September, sharply down from a 6.7% rate in the April-June quarter and 6.3% in the January-March period.

Overall, though, the economy has recovered with surprising vigor. In June 2020, with the economy still

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reeling from the pandemic, the Federal Reserve's policymaking committee forecast that unemployment would average 9.3% in the final three months of the year and 6.5% at the end of 2021. In reality? The jobless rate plummeted from 11.1% in June 2020 to 6.7% by year's end. It's now at a near-fully healthy 4.2%.

Flush with government payments and, in many cases, savings accrued from working at home and from stock-market gains, people in rich countries were sitting on larger piles of cash and spending a lot of it.

Capital Economics calculates that households in advanced economies like the United States and the European Union were holding "excess savings" at mid-year of \$3.7 trillion — the amount above what they would likely have saved if the pandemic had never happened.

OVERWHELMED

In some ways, it's been too much of a good thing.

Robust demand, especially for autos, appliances and other physical goods, overwhelmed global manufacturers. Factories couldn't obtain enough raw materials and parts. Ports and freight yards were swamped. Companies grappled with shortages of everything they needed, notably workers.

That was particularly true at many restaurants. At the newly re-opened Gotham restaurant in Manhattan, for instance, patrons are unable to find handcrafted chocolates, once a big draw for the holidays, or grab a burger or order oysters. Gotham couldn't find enough employees to make the chocolates, work the grill or shuck the oysters.

"We worked to bring the restaurant back to life," said Bret Csencsitz, the new owner of the restaurant. "The demand is there. The product is superior. Yet I don't have enough people to make the business what it needs to be and what it should be."

The restaurant was also hampered by shortages of basic supplies like ceramic plates and glassware. Food costs fluctuated wildly. Halibut, which cost \$14 a pound one day, was \$24.99 a week and a half later.

Across the Atlantic, MTA, an auto components manufacturer that endured Italy's first lockdown in February 2020, reopened within a week and ended 2020 with unexpectedly healthy business. But the recovery bred new troubles.

"Everything is lacking," said Maria Vittoria Falchetti, the company's marketing chief.

"Plastic is lacking. Metals are lacking. Paper is lacking. Microchips — don't even mention. Also, we are struggling with a big increase in prices in these materials, and also energy,"

In Asia, manufacturers of everything from toys to cellphones suffered from a global shortage of computer chips and surging costs for components, raw materials and shipping.

Kaixiang Electric Appliance Co., which makes LED lamps and flashlights in Ningbo, south of Shanghai, paid 20% more in 2021 for labor, materials and complications resulting from shipping bottlenecks.

"The current delay in delivery is about one or two months," said Susan Yang, CEO of the 80-employee company.

"The sharp rise in sea freight has eaten into manufacturers' profits and ours," said Max Chen, general manager of Makefigure Co., a toymaker in the southern Chinese city of Shenzhen. "If we want to stay in the business, we need to lower our profit expectations and develop new clients."

The supply chain problems have been compounded by what Kirkegaard of the German Marshall Fund calls "idiosyncratic things."

A drought in Taiwan curtailed production at water-dependent computer chip plants. A February deep freeze shut down petrochemical plants in Texas. A huge container ship got stuck in the Suez canal for a week in March and cut off shipping between Asia and Europe.

THE PAIN OF HIGH PRICES

The supply chain bottlenecks have driven up costs, contributing to a problem that most rich countries hadn't had to endure for years: Persistently high inflation. The IMF expects consumer prices in advanced economies to rise 2.8% this year. That would be the highest such rate since 2008.

Soaring energy prices, a response to the brisk economic recovery, contributed mightily to the runup in prices. The price of the U.S. benchmark crude skyrocketed 75% — to \$84 a barrel — from January through

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October, before easing in recent weeks as the omicron variant raised the prospect of slower growth.

Inflationary pressures were especially intense in the United States. In addition to energy, some of the largest cost spikes were for such necessities as food, housing, autos and clothing — goods and services that millions of Americans regularly depend upon. Especially hard hit were lower-income households with little or no cash cushions. Last month, U.S. consumer prices shot up 6.8% from 12 months earlier — the biggest year-over-year increase since 1982.

Over the past year, used-car prices surged 31%, beef roast 26%, men's suits and coats 14%. And price hikes are outpacing wage gains. After inflation, U.S. workers' hourly earnings, despite pay increases, were actually down 1.9% last month compared with November 2020.

At a Mobil station in Yonkers, New York, a gallon of regular gas was selling for \$3.89. Mario Bodden, a project manager at a nearby mall, said it cost \$50 to fill up, instead of the \$35 he was used to.

"You start thinking: Do I go shopping? Do I fill it up today?" Bodden said. "Every trip is planned and targeted. So there's a lifestyle change."

"We still have to do what we have to do to survive," Ray Khoury, a hospital administrator, said as he filled up a Mercedes at a BP station in Yonkers. "The everyday needs of your families, your kids — it trickles down. Forget about savings. Savings are shot."

A MADE-IN-AMERICA LABOR SHORTAGE

Even while absorbing higher prices, workers, especially in America, were benefiting from a tighter labor market that gave them leverage to secure better pay and benefits. With many white collar employees able to work from home, companies found that their staffs didn't need to commute to the office to do their jobs. That meant that workers could spend more time at home and save money they would have spent on parking, commuting and lunches out.

The United States, in particular, experienced acute labor shortages. At the depths of the pandemic recession in the spring of 2020, employers had slashed 22 million jobs. As the economy recovered, they refilled more than 18 million jobs — and complained that they couldn't find enough workers.

In September and October, employers listed 1.4 job openings for every unemployed American, the most in records going back 15 years. That marked a striking reversal from April 2020, in the depths of the coronavirus recession, when there were just 0.2 openings for each unemployed person — or, stated another way, when there were five unemployed people for every available job.

A rise in early retirements, a shortage of affordable child care, the reluctance of many restaurant workers to return and a drop in immigration contributed to the labor shortage. The government also expanded unemployment aid and gave relief checks to households, bolstering their savings and allowing the jobless to be choosier about their next employer.

In Europe, by contrast, governments essentially paid companies to keep workers on their payrolls.

"In Europe, you didn't have this fire-and-rehire response," Kirkegaard said.

Keeping European workers on company payrolls, he noted, made it "much more seamless to reopen the economies in Europe because basically people just went back to their old job."

American companies, by contrast, had to call back employees they had laid off or find new ones.

Workers in some cases gained a rare upper hand in negotiations over wages and working conditions.

Workers who are in particularly high demand and in short supply, many of whom are in relatively lower-paying service jobs, are receiving pay raises high enough to exceed inflation. Adjusted for inflation, hourly earnings have jumped 12% in the past year for people who work at bars and nearly 6% for workers at hotels and restaurants.

Hundreds of Frito-Lay workers went on strike in July to protest mandatory overtime shifts. More than 10,000 workers at Deere & Co. struck in the fall before winning a contract with 10% raises. U.S. cereal workers at Kellogg Co. have been on strike since October.

Among the newly emboldened workers was Leticia Reyes, a mother of five who has worked at a Jack in the Box restaurant in Sacramento, California, for nearly two years. Over the summer, she and her co-workers went on strike to protest working conditions, including an air conditioner that constantly broke,

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forcing them to toil in sweltering heat.

Reyes said the store's regional manager installed a new air conditioner and raised workers' wages by \$1.25 an hour.

"The increase was small, but every little bit helps," she said.

American workers, as a whole, were hardly afraid to change jobs: 4.2 million of them quit in October, just off the all-time record of 4.4 million, set one month earlier.

After COVID hit in March 2020, Stephanye Blakely of Louisville, Kentucky, quit her job at a warehouse. With schools closed, she needed to care for her 7-year-old son. She had been thinking about leaving anyway. The warehouse work, she said, was tedious.

Blakely, 36, spent three months training for a tech career with Hack Reactor, a software engineering boot camp, where she learned about database management. She had to tap her savings and take out a loan. But the timing was right. The job market was rebounding, and Blakely eventually landed a job at a tech company — earning 10 times what she had made before.

And she could work from home, giving her the flexibility to care for her son. At first, it looked as though she'd eventually have to move to New York for the job, but the company decided to let employees keep working from home. She could stay in Louisville and avoid New York's much higher housing costs.

Likewise, life improved for Pamela Thompson of Tampa, Florida, who had labored in the federal court system for more than 10 years, most recently as supervisor. While still working at her job, Thompson, 38, had started a business — My Shade & Texture, a beauty supply store. When the pandemic hit, she decided to take it on full time.

She has endured ups and downs with periodic shutdowns during the pandemic. But she says she doesn't regret anything. She earns "significantly more" than she did before, with work she enjoys far more.

"I don't have a desire to return to corporate America," she said. "I love doing what I'm doing."

Wiseman reported from Washington and Durbin from Detroit. AP Writers Anne D'Innocenzio and Mae Anderson in New York; Cathy Bussewitz in Yonkers, New York; Tom Krisher in Detroit; Colleen Barry in Milan; Joe McDonald in Beijing; Christopher Rugaber in Washington; David McHugh in Frankfurt, Germany; and David Koenig in Dallas contributed to this report.

Pope at 85: Gloves come off as Francis' reform hits stride

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Pope Francis celebrated his 85th birthday on Friday, a milestone made even more remarkable given the coronavirus pandemic, his summertime intestinal surgery and the weight of history: His predecessor retired at this age and the last pope to have lived any longer was Leo XIII over a century ago.

Yet Francis is going strong, recently concluding a whirlwind trip to Cyprus and Greece after his pandemic-defying jaunts this year to Iraq, Slovakia and Hungary. And he shows no sign of slowing down his campaign to make the post-COVID world a more environmentally sustainable, economically just and fraternal place where the poor are prioritized.

Francis also has set in motion an unprecedented two-year consultation of rank-and-file Catholics on making the church more attuned to the laity.

"I see a lot of energy," said the Rev. Antonio Spadaro, one of Francis' trusted Jesuit communications gurus. "What we're seeing is the natural expression, the fruit of the seeds that he has sown."

But Francis also is beset by problems at home and abroad and is facing a sustained campaign of opposition from the conservative Catholic right. He has responded with the papal equivalent of "no more Mr. Nice Guy."

After spending the first eight years of his papacy gently nudging Catholic hierarchs to embrace financial prudence and responsible governance, Francis took the gloves off this year, and appears poised to keep it that way.

Since his last birthday, Francis ordered a 10% pay cut for cardinals across the board, and slashed sala-

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ries to a lesser degree for Vatican employees, in a bid to rein in the Vatican's 50-million-euro (\$57 million) budget deficit.

To fight corruption, he imposed a 40-euro (\$45) gift cap for Holy See personnel. He passed a law allowing cardinals and bishops to be criminally prosecuted by the Vatican's lay-led tribunal, setting the stage for the high-profile trial underway of his onetime close adviser, Cardinal Angelo Becciu, on finance-related charges.

Outside the Vatican, he hasn't made many new friends, either. After approving a 2019 law outlining the way cardinals and bishops could be investigated for sex abuse cover-up, the past year saw nearly a dozen Polish episcopal heads roll.

Francis also approved term limits for leaders of lay Catholic movements to try to curb their abuses of power, resulting in the forced removal of influential church leaders. He recently accepted the resignation of the Paris archbishop after a media storm alleging governance and personal improprieties.

"In the past year, Pope Francis has accelerated his efforts at reform by putting real teeth into the church's canon law regarding finances," the Rev. Robert Gahl, director of the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross's Program of Church Management, said.

"While celebrating his birthday, Vatican watchers are also looking for more concrete signs of compliance regarding the pope's new rules, especially from those who report directly to him within the Vatican," Gahl said in an email, noting that a change in culture is needed alongside Francis' new policies and regulations.

Despite Francis' tough line, the pope nevertheless got a round of birthday applause from Holy See cardinals, bishops and priests who joined him for an Advent meditation on Friday morning. Later in the day, he welcomed a dozen African and Syrian migrants whom the Vatican helped resettle from Cyprus.

If there was anything Francis did this past year that riled his critics, it was his July decision to reverse his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI, and reimpose restrictions on celebrating the old Latin Mass. Francis said he needed to take action because Benedict's 2007 decision to allow freer celebration of the old rite had divided the church and been exploited by conservatives.

"Some wanted me dead," Francis said of his critics.

Speaking with fellow Jesuits in Slovakia in September, Francis confided that he knew his 10-day hospital stay in July for surgery to remove 33 centimeters (about 13 inches) of his large intestine had fueled hope among some conservative Catholics eager for a new pope.

"I know there were even meetings among priests who thought the pope was in worse shape than what was being said," he told the Jesuits, in comments that were later published in the Vatican-approved Jesuit journal *La Civiltà Cattolica*. "They were preparing the conclave."

That may not have been the case, but if history is any guide, those priests might not have been wrong to have at least discussed the prospect.

Benedict was 85 when he resigned in February 2013, becoming the first pope to step down in 600 years and paving the way for Francis' election. While enjoying robust health at the time, Benedict said he simply didn't have the strength to carry on.

Before him, John Paul II died at age 84 and John Paul I died at 65 after just 33 days on the job. In fact, all 20th-century popes died in their early 80s or younger, with the exception of Pope Leo XIII, who was 93 when he died in 1903.

Early on in his pontificate, Francis predicted a short papacy of two or three years, and credited Benedict with having "opened the door" to future papal retirements.

But the Argentine Jesuit made clear after his July surgery that resigning "didn't even cross my mind."

That is welcome news to Sister Nathalie Becquart, one of the top women at the Vatican. Francis tapped her to help organize the two-year consultation process of Catholics around the globe that will end in 2023 with a meeting of bishops, known as a synod.

Becquart knows well what the pope is up against as he tries to remake the church into a less clerical, more laity-focused institution.

"It's a call to change," she told a conference this week. "And we can say it's not an easy path."

Over Ethiopia's objections, UN rights body backs war monitor

By JAMEY KEATEN Associated Press

GENEVA (AP) — Over Ethiopia's objections, the U.N.'s main human rights body voted Friday to create an international team of experts to boost scrutiny of rights abuses in the devastating yearlong war between Ethiopian government forces and fighters from the country's Tigray region.

Ethiopia's government decried a "neocolonialist mentality" after the European Union and other Western countries sought a special session of the Human Rights Council to ratchet up attention on the conflict that has left tens of thousands dead.

A resolution that won the council's approval on a 21-15 vote with 11 countries abstaining creates a three-person team with a one-year mandate to monitor and report on rights abuses in Ethiopia.

The push from EU and other Western countries demonstrates their frustration that a joint investigation between Ethiopia's human rights commission and the U.N. human rights office, which culminated with a report last month, didn't go far enough.

"The conflict has continued with ongoing fighting beyond the borders of Tigray. Our office continues to receive credible reports of severe human rights violations and abuses by all parties," the U.N. deputy high commissioner for human rights, Nada al-Nashif, told representatives at Friday's session. "The humanitarian impact of the conflict is increasingly dramatic."

Nearly 10 million people in northern Ethiopia face acute food insecurity, and at least 2 million have been forced to flee their homes. Humanitarian workers have little access and face hostility. Ethiopia's government has sought to restrict reporting on the war and detained some journalists, including a video freelancer accredited to The Associated Press, Amir Aman Kiyaro.

Between 5,000 and 7,000 people swept up under Ethiopia's new state of emergency remain detained, most of them Tigrayans, al-Nashif said: "Many are detained incommunicado or in unknown locations. This is tantamount to enforced disappearance, and a matter of very grave alarm."

The government-created Ethiopian Human Rights Commission acknowledged in a statement this week that there was "value-added" in encouraging the joint investigation to continue, but said creation of a new body "is repetitive, counterproductive to ongoing implementation processes, and further delays redress for victims and survivors."

Ethiopia's ambassador in Geneva, Zenebe Kebede Korcho, said his government rejects the draft resolution the Human Rights Council is considering. At Friday's session, he called the resolution a "deliberate destabilization effort" and said the government "will not cooperate with any mechanism imposed on it." The Africa group of nations at the council backed his position in a separate statement.

"Multilateralism, after all these years, is once again being hijacked by a neocolonialist mentality. Ethiopia is being targeted and singled out at the Human Rights Council for defending a democratically elected government," the ambassador said. "The council is being used as an instrument of political pressure."

The Ethiopian ambassador said Ethiopia's government had set up an "inter-ministerial task force" in response to the human rights report issued last month, and it has begun work.

The joint report decried the "terrible toll on civilians" in the conflict in the Tigray region, and human rights violations and abuses committed by all sides. The rare collaboration by the U.N. human rights office with the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission was hampered by authorities' intimidation and restrictions, and didn't visit some of the war's worst-affected locations.

The U.N. human rights chief, Michelle Bachelet, has said all sides in the war in the Tigray region have committed brutal abuses that could amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The investigation broke little new ground and confirmed in general the abuses described by witnesses throughout the war. But it gave little sense of scale, saying for example that the more than 1,300 rapes reported to authorities were likely far fewer than the real number.

The government has insisted the report cleared it of allegations that genocide was happening in Tigray.

The conflict erupted in November 2020 after a political falling-out between the Tigray forces that long dominated the national government and Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's current government. Ethnic Tigrayans

across the country have reported being targeted with arbitrary detentions, while civilians in Tigray have described gang rapes, human-caused famine and mass expulsions.

The Tigray forces now face a growing number of allegations of abuses after taking the fighting into Ethiopia's neighboring Amhara and Afar regions in recent months. The joint investigation didn't examine that period.

For a special council session to take place, the support of one-third of its 47 member states is required.

Cara Anna in Nairobi, Kenya, contributed to this report.

Biden acknowledges \$2T bill stalled, but vows it will pass

By LISA MASCARO and ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden has all but acknowledged negotiations over his sweeping domestic policy package will likely push into the new year, as he does not yet have the votes in the Senate to lift the roughly \$2 trillion bill to passage.

Biden issued a statement Thursday evening as it became increasingly apparent the Democratic senators would not meet their Christmas deadline, in large part because of unyielding opposition from one holdout: Sen. Joe Manchin.

The president said that in their recent discussions, the West Virginia senator has reiterated his support for the framework he, the president and other Democrats had agreed to on the flagship bill. Biden said he also briefed House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer earlier Thursday about the most recent round of talks with Manchin.

"I believe that we will bridge our differences and advance the Build Back Better plan, even in the face of fierce Republican opposition," Biden said in the statement.

Biden said he and his team will continue to have discussions with Manchin next week. The White House and the congressional leaders plan to work "over the days and weeks ahead" to finish up the details, he said. Both he and Schumer are determined, he said, to bring the package to the Senate floor for votes as early as possible.

"We will — we must — get Build Back Better passed," Biden said.

Biden's statement was a much-needed intervention, allowing Senate Democrats an off-ramp to what has been months of tangled negotiations that appear nowhere near resolved as time runs out ahead of the Christmas holiday.

At the same time, Democrats were rushing to show progress on another jammed-up priority: voting rights legislation that, Biden acknowledged, also faces hurdles. "We must also press forward on voting rights legislation, and make progress on this as quickly as possible," Biden said.

Schumer, D-N.Y., had set Senate passage before Christmas as his goal, but disputes with Manchin and other Democrats remain. It had become clear that the party was seeking an explicit move from Biden in hopes he would cut a deal with Manchin, or urge lawmakers to delay action until January.

The sudden end-of-year shift comes as Democrats suffered another blow to their agenda late Thursday when the Senate parliamentarian decided that hard-fought efforts to include immigration law changes should be stripped from the package because they don't comply with the chamber's rules.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Friday that Biden, the administration and its partners in Congress "vehemently disagree" with the parliamentarian's ruling. Psaki said they would support efforts to move the immigration changes forward short of changing Senate parliamentarian rules.

The ruling is one part of an ongoing, time-consuming review by Senate parliamentarian Elizabeth MacDonough about whether many of the bill's provisions violate the chamber's rules and should be dropped.

As the day's business began, Schumer barely mentioned what was becoming an obvious stall. Instead, he described Democrats' efforts to break a logjam on voting rights legislation and a pile of nominations the Senate will consider "as we continue working to bring the Senate to a position where we can move

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forward" on the social and environment bill.

Using his sway in a 50-50 Senate where Democrats need unanimity to prevail, Manchin has continued his drive to force his party to cut the bill's cost and eliminate programs he opposes. All Republicans oppose the package, arguing the measure carrying many of Biden's paramount domestic priorities is too expensive and would worsen inflation.

"The best Christmas gift Washington could give working families would be putting this bad bill on ice," said Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky.

McConnell and Manchin met in the GOP leader's office, as they often do, a very public reminder of the West Virginia senator's conservative leanings and Democrats' slim hold on the majority. "We do appreciate the fact that he seems to be one of the few remaining centrists left in the Democratic Party," McConnell said.

A person who was unauthorized to discuss the rocky status of the Biden-Manchin talks and spoke only on condition of anonymity said Wednesday that Manchin was pushing to eliminate the bill's renewal of expanded benefits under the child tax credit, a keystone of Democratic efforts to reduce child poverty.

As he exited a Democratic senators' closed-door lunch, Manchin was mum on his next move, telling reporters he had "nothing" to share.

Earlier Wednesday, Manchin said assertions he wants to strip the child tax credit improvements were "a lot of bad rumors."

Democrats were livid over the possibility of eliminating one of the bill's most significant achievements — the continuation of enhanced child tax credits that have been sending monthly checks to millions of families during the COVID-19 crisis and will expire next year without further action. If the bill were to clear the Senate in January, Psaki said Friday that the White House has had some conversations with the Treasury Department about issuing double child tax credit payments in February "as an option."

Letting the social and environment legislation slip into next year, when congressional elections will be held, would be ominous for the bill's ultimate prospects.

With Democrats having blown past previous self-imposed deadlines on the push, another delay would fuel Republican accusations that they are incompetently running a government they control. Democrats are bracing for November elections when the GOP has a real chance of winning control of the House and Senate.

Word of Manchin's stance prompted a backlash from colleagues, whom he's frustrated for months with constant demands to cut the bill's size and scope. The measure also has money for health care, universal prekindergarten and climate change programs, largely paid for with tax boosts on big corporations and the rich.

The second-ranking Democrat, Sen. Dick Durbin of Illinois, said "the level of emotion" among Democrats over the child tax credit "is very high," and said he was "stunned" when he heard about Manchin's demands.

Manchin has wanted the overall bill's 10-year price tag to fall below \$2 trillion. He also wants all its programs to last the full decade.

The current bill would extend the enhanced child tax credit for just one year, a device to contain the bill's cost. Renewing the improved benefits for 10 years would increase its current one-year cost of around \$100 billion to over \$1 trillion, and doing that while cutting the overall bill's size would wreak havoc on Democrats' other priorities.

The Treasury Department says the expanded tax credit has helped the families of 61 million children.

The House approved its version of the legislation in November.

Associated Press writers Colleen Long, Darlene Superville and Farnoush Amiri contributed to this report.

Suspected arson in downtown Osaka building leaves 24 dead

By CHISATO TANAKA and MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

OSAKA, Japan (AP) — A fire that spread from a fourth-floor mental clinic in an eight-story building in

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downtown Osaka in western Japan on Friday left 24 dead in what police were investigating as a possible case of arson and murder.

Police were searching for a man in his 50s to 60s who witnesses saw carrying a paper bag from which an unidentified liquid was dripping. He may have been among the 24 dead, or is one of the three people who were resuscitated and remain in serious conditions, or may have fled, a police investigator said on condition of anonymity because he wasn't authorized to speak to the media.

Fire officials who reached the building in the major business, shopping and entertainment area of Kitashinchi in Osaka found 27 people in a state of cardiac arrest, said Osaka fire department official Akira Kishimoto.

One woman was conscious and brought down by an aerial ladder from a window on the sixth floor and was being treated in a hospital, he said. Later Friday, 24 people were pronounced dead, the fire department said.

In Japan, the authorities customarily describe those without vital signs as being in "shinpai teishi," or a state of cardiac and pulmonary arrest, and do not confirm deaths until they are pronounced at hospitals and other necessary procedures are done.

A doctor at one of the hospitals treating the victims said he believed many of them died after inhaling carbon monoxide as they had limited external injuries. Police said the cause of deaths could not be determined until the bodies were autopsied.

One of clients said the clinic was popular and was always crowded with 15-20 people waiting, especially on Fridays when special counselling and programs were available for those preparing to return to work after taking a sick leave, NHK said.

Authorities are investigating a possibility that the smoke filled the floor so quickly that the victims had no time to escape, Nippon Television said.

Hours later Friday night, crowds were still gathering outside of the building to take a glimpse of the scene where firefighters and police officers were investigating.

"I haven't heard of the cause but I'm shocked and wondering why someone would do this," said Yuji Uehara, who works for a finance company. "I also offer my condolences to those who died."

The building houses the mental and internal medicine clinic, an English language school and other businesses. Most of the victims are believed to be visitors at the clinic on the fourth floor, fire officials said.

Osaka police earlier said they were working to determine whether the fire was caused by arson. They later set up a team at the prefectural police headquarters, a sign they strongly suspect arson and murder.

According to NHK, a female outpatient at the clinic's reception desk saw the man being sought by police. Another person nearby said the fire started soon after he put the leaky bag next to a stove on the floor and kicked it, with more of the liquid pouring out.

The clinic's psychiatrist, Kotaro Nishizawa, could not be reached since the fire, NHK said. It quoted his father as saying the doctor hinted at a problem at the clinic but did not elaborate.

People on other floors of the building were safely evacuated, fire officials said.

NHK quoted a witness as saying she heard a woman's voice coming from the fourth floor calling for help. Another witness told TV Asahi he saw flames and smoke coming out of windows on the fourth floor when he stepped outside after hearing a commotion.

In total, 70 fire engines were mobilized to fight the fire, which was fully extinguished more than six hours later, officials said.

In 2019 at the Kyoto Animation studio, an attacker stormed into the building and set it on fire, killing 36 people and injuring more than 30 others. The incident shocked Japan and drew an outpouring of grief from anime fans worldwide. In 2001, an intentionally set blaze in Tokyo's Kabukicho entertainment district killed 44 people — the country's worst known case of arson in modern times.

Yamaguchi reported from Tokyo.

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Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Saturday, Dec. 18, the 352nd day of 2021. There are 13 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 18, 2019, the U.S. House impeached President Donald Trump on two charges, sending his case to the Senate for trial; the articles of impeachment accused him of abusing the power of the presidency to investigate rival Joe Biden ahead of the 2020 election and then obstructing Congress' investigation. (The trial would end in acquittal by the Senate.)

On this date:

In 1787, New Jersey became the third state to ratify the U.S. Constitution.

In 1863, in a speech to the Prussian Parliament, Prime Minister Otto von Bismarck declared, "Politics is not an exact science."

In 1865, the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, abolishing slavery, was declared in effect by Secretary of State William H. Seward.

In 1892, Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky's ballet "The Nutcracker" publicly premiered in St. Petersburg, Russia; although now considered a classic, it received a generally negative reception from critics.

In 1917, Congress passed the 18th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution prohibiting "the manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors" and sent it to the states for ratification.

In 1940, Adolf Hitler signed a secret directive ordering preparations for a Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. (Operation Barbarossa was launched in June 1941.)

In 1944, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the government's wartime evacuation of people of Japanese descent from the West Coast while at the same time ruling that "concededly loyal" Americans of Japanese ancestry could not continue to be detained.

In 1956, Japan was admitted to the United Nations.

In 1957, the Shippingport Atomic Power Station in Pennsylvania, the first nuclear facility to generate electricity in the United States, went on line. (It was taken out of service in 1982.)

In 1958, the world's first communications satellite, SCORE (Signal Communication by Orbiting Relay Equipment), nicknamed "Chatterbox," was launched by the United States aboard an Atlas rocket.

In 2000, the Electoral College cast its ballots, with President-elect George W. Bush receiving the expected 271; Al Gore, however, received 266, one fewer than expected, because of a District of Columbia Democrat who'd left her ballot blank to protest the district's lack of representation in Congress.

In 2003, two federal appeals courts ruled the U.S. military could not indefinitely hold prisoners without access to lawyers or American courts.

Ten years ago: The last convoy of heavily armored U.S. troops left Iraq, crossing into Kuwait in darkness in the final moments of a nine-year war. Vaclav Havel, 75, the dissident playwright who became Czechoslovakia's first democratically elected president, died in the northern Czech Republic.

Five years ago: A suicide bomber blew himself up outside a military camp in the southern Yemeni city of Aden, killing at least 52 soldiers; the Islamic State group's Yemen-based affiliate claimed responsibility. Actress Zsa Zsa Gabor died at her Los Angeles home at age 99.

One year ago: The U.S. added a second COVID-19 vaccine to its arsenal, as the Food and Drug Administration authorized an emergency rollout of the vaccine developed by Moderna Inc. and the National Institutes of Health; a vaccine from Pfizer Inc. and Germany's BioNTech was already being dispensed. Vice President Mike Pence became the highest ranking U.S. official to receive the first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine in a live-television event aimed at reassuring Americans the shot was safe. The National Hockey League and players reached a tentative deal to hold a 56-game season in 2021 beginning in mid-January.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Roger Mosley is 83. Rock musician Keith Richards is 78. Writer-director Alan Rudolph is 78. Movie producer-director Steven Spielberg is 75. Blues artist Rod Piazza is 74. Movie director Gillian Armstrong is 71. Movie reviewer Leonard Maltin is 71. Rock musician Elliot Easton is 68. Actor Ray

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Liotta is 67. Comedian Ron White is 65. R&B singer Angie Stone is 60. Actor Brad Pitt is 58. Professional wrestler-turned-actor "Stone Cold" Steve Austin is 57. Actor Shawn Christian is 56. Actor Rachel Griffiths is 53. Singer Alejandro Sanz is 53. Actor Casper Van Dien is 53. Country/rap singer Cowboy Troy is 51. International Tennis Hall of Famer Arantxa Sanchez Vicario is 50. DJ Lethal (Limp Bizkit) is 49. Pop singer Sia is 46. Country singer Randy Houser is 45. Actor Josh Dallas is 43. Actor Katie Holmes is 43. Actor Ravi Patel is 43. Singer Christina Aguilera is 41. Actor Ashley Benson is 32. NHL defenseman Victor Hedman is 31. Actor-singer Bridgit Mendler is 29. Atlanta Braves outfielder Ronald Acuña Jr. is 24. Electro-pop singer Billie Eilish is 20. Actor Isabella Crovetti is 17.