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UpComing Events

Monday, Dec. 20

Girls Basketball at Redfield. 7th grade game at 4 p.m. followed by 8th grade game. Junior Varsity at 6 p.m. followed by Varsity game.

Tuesday, Dec. 21

7 p.m.: City Council Meeting
Boys Basketball hosting Redfield. C game at 5 p.m. followed by JV and then varsity.

Wednesday, Dec. 22

St. John's Lutheran Christmas Program on GDIL-IVE.COM. 10:30 a.m. and Noon.

End of Second Quarter

1 p.m.: Elementary Christmas Concert

2 p.m.: Early dismissal for Christmas vacation

Monday, Dec. 27

Boys Basketball at Jamestown College Classic, play at 6 p.m.

Thursday, Dec. 30

9:30 a.m.: Wrestling at Webster

Friday, Dec. 31

Girls Basketball at Webster. JV at noon followed by varsity

Monday, Jan. 4

School resumes
Basketball Double Header at Warner. Girls JV at 4 p.m. followed by Boys JV, Girls Varsity and Boys Varsity.

5 p.m.: Junior High Wrestling Tournament at Groton.

Thursday, Jan. 6

6 p.m.: Wrestling Tri-angular at Groton with Redfield and Webster

Friday, Jan. 7

Penguin Classic Debate on-line
5 p.m.: Junior High Wrestling at Milbank
Girls Basketball hosts Sisseton with JV at 6 p.m. and varsity to follow

Saturday, Jan. 8

Groton Robotics Tournament, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.
Penguin Classic Debate on-line
Girls Basketball Classic at Redfield

Groton Daily Independent
PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445
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The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.
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Volleyball Awards

L-R: Alyssa Thaler, Elizabeth Flihs, Maddie Bjerke, Madeline Flihs, Megan Flihs, Sydney Leicht, Aspen Johnson, Anna Fjeldheim

Ace Award: Anna Fjeldheim

Most improved: Aspen Johnson

Rookie of the Year: Elizabeth Flihs

Defensive Player of the Year: Alyssa Thaler

Offensive Player of the Year: Madeline Flihs

MVP: Sydney Leicht

Spirit of the Tiger: Maddie Bjerke and Megan Flihs

NEC All Conference team: Madeline Flihs and Sydney Leicht

(Courtesy Photo)



Volleyball Team

Front L-R: Allyssa Locke, Elizabeth Flihs, Laila Roberts, Carly Guthmiller, Alyssa Thaler

Middle L-R: Trista Keith, Marlee Tollifson, Anna Fjeldheim, Emma Schinkel, Aspen Johnson, Lydia Meier, Ashlyn Sperry

Back L-R: Chelsea Hanson, Kyleigh Englund, Madeline Flihs, Megan Flihs, Maddie Bjerke, Kelsie Frost, Hollie Frost, Sydney Leicht

(Courtesy Photo)

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Friendly Fellows and Daisies 4-H

The Friendly Fellows and Daisies 4H Club met on Dec. 5th at Claremont Methodist Church for their annual Christmas Party. In attendance were the following: Janet Frey, Yvonne Gibbs, Virginia Pulkey, Deloris Bruns, Les Warrington, Diann Warrington, Karl Eichler, Val Eichler, Ruth Nelson, Connie Anderson, Missi Smith, Jeremy Smith, Ryan Smith, McKenzie Smith, Trinity Smith, Stefan Wright, Lynn Wright, Collin Eichler, Emily Eichler, Hudson Eichler, Arthur Eichler, Jason Warrington, Robyn Warrington, Logan Warrington, Ashlynn Warrington, Greyson Warrington, Wade Marzahn, Renee Marzahn, Andrew Marzahn, Mike Frey, Mike Ringgenberg, Molly Ringgenberg, Brad Pauli, Michelle Pauli, Staci Anderson, Logan Ringgenberg, Blake Pauli, Hailey Pauli, Ryan Tracy, Carla Tracy, Kella Tracy, Kinton Tracy, Treyton Smith, Darin Zoellner, Walker Zoellner, and Parker Zoellner. Everyone enjoyed the club slide show, card bingo and potluck. Snowman popcorn gifts were given to our guests.

Groton Prairie Mixed

Dec. 9 Team Standings: Coyotes 14, Cheetahs 14, Chipmunks 13, Shih Tzus 12, Jackelopes 10, Foxes 9

Men's High Games: Brad Larson 223, Roger Spanier 199, Ron Belden 194

Women's High Games: Sue Stanley 179, Vicki Walter 174, Cindy Frohling 165

Men's High Series: Brad Larson 551, Randy Stanley 519, Roger Spanier 516

Women's High Series: Sue Stanley 479, Darci Spanier 435, Vicki Walter 428

Dec. 16 Team Standings: Coyotes 17, Chipmunks 17, Cheetahs 14, Shih Tzus 13, Jackelopes 13, Foxes 10

Men's High Games: Brad Waage 214, Mike Siegler 213, 199, Lance Frohling 193

Women's High Games: Sue Stanley 194, Darci Spanier 191, Vicki Walter 190

Men's High Series: Mike Siegler 578, Brad Waage 528, Lance Frohling 519

Women's High Series: Vicki Walter 513, Sue Stanley 491, Darci Spanier 476

Food Intolerance or Allergy... Which Is It?

Food intolerance and food allergy are common these days. When I was a kid, no one asked about nut allergies or gluten sensitivities when inviting you to a birthday party. You could bring homemade snacks to school. Peanuts were served to everyone on airplanes. Today, we are constantly reminded to be aware and take precautions to help prevent exposure for those who are intolerant or allergic.

Understanding the difference between allergy and intolerance is important. Allergies can result in life threatening reactions, whereas food intolerances are not life threatening but can be very problematic. Food allergies and intolerance have many overlapping symptoms making diagnosis difficult.

Food intolerance is very common and is estimated to affect 20 percent of the world's population. Food intolerance occurs when the body has a chemical reaction to eating a particular food or drink. Most food intolerance reactions involve the digestive system, skin, and respiratory system. Many of us have mild intolerance, say to dairy, but other common triggers are gluten, caffeine, and eggs.

Food allergies can be more serious and result from an inappropriate immune system response. Nuts, for example, are harmless yet the immune system can identify them as toxic. Even a small exposure can lead to a life-threatening reaction known as anaphylaxis.

Thankfully, we have new approaches to manage food allergy. Today, we better understand how exposure to a broad variety of food in infancy can reduce risk of developing allergy as we age. Another option available is immune therapy for peanut allergy.

On the other hand, managing food intolerance requires an understanding of what food or ingredient triggers symptoms, then we focus on avoidance. We do not have immune therapy for food intolerance.

Both food intolerances and allergies are becoming more prevalent. For example, between 2007 and 2016 there was a 377 percent increase in treatment of diagnosed anaphylactic reactions to food. Why are more people having challenges with food? It is not clear. Maybe it is our environment, our diet, or both. No specific cause has been identified.

Our world has changed and our treatments for food allergies and food intolerance have changed as well. It seems we will continue to have special dietary requests for a long time to come, so getting the right diagnosis is our most important first step.

Jennifer May, M.D. practices rheumatology in Rapid City, South Dakota. She is a contributing Prairie Doc® columnist and guest host this week on the Prairie Doc® television show. For free and easy access to the entire Prairie Doc® library, visit www.prairedoc.org and follow Prairie Doc® on Facebook featuring On Call with the Prairie Doc® a medical Q&A show streaming on Facebook and broadcast on SDPB most Thursdays at 7 p.m. central.

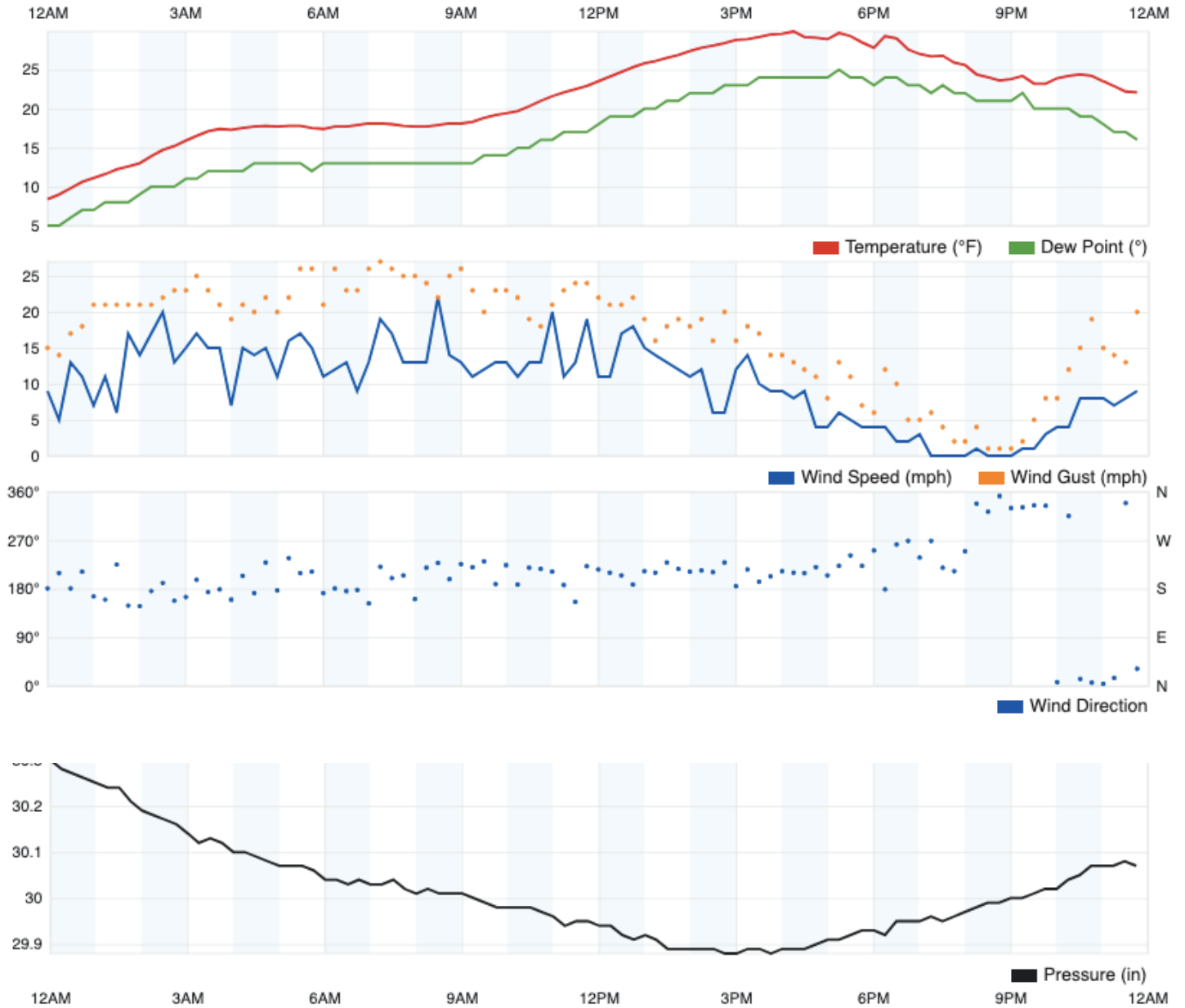


Jennifer May, M.D.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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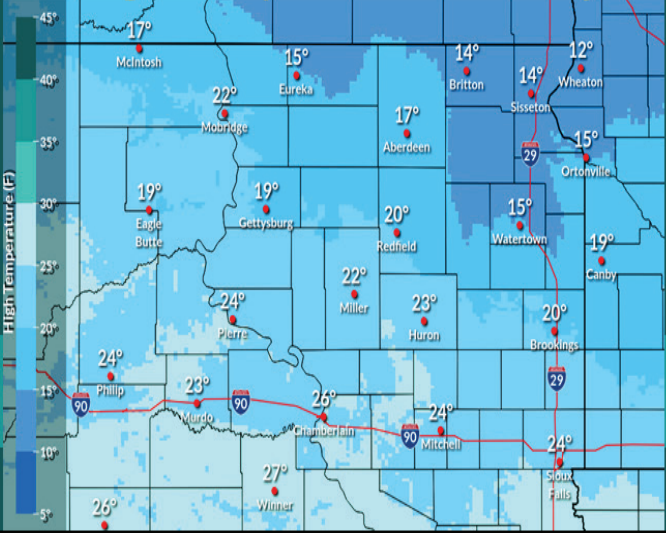
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Monday	Monday Night	Tuesday	Tuesday Night	Wednesday
				
Slight Chance Snow then Sunny	Mostly Cloudy then Slight Chance Snow	Blustery. Slight Chance Snow then Sunny	Partly Cloudy	Mostly Sunny
High: 17 °F↓	Low: 9 °F↑	High: 23 °F	Low: 7 °F	High: 32 °F


Cooler Monday

before mild weather returns through Friday

High Temperatures Monday




TUE




20 to 34°

WED




32 to 45°

THU



33 to 46°


FRI



Slight Chance (20%) of Snow over ne. SD & w central MN

30 to 40°

Temperatures warmest over central SD, and coldest over west central MN



NWS Aberdeen, SD

Highs on Monday will only be in the teens to low 20s. Expect milder air to move in for the rest of the work week. Most of the week should be dry. There is a slight chance (20% chance) of snow over north-eastern SD and west central MN Thursday night into Saturday. At this point we're looking at little to no significant weather related travel concerns through the holiday weekend.

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Today in Weather History

December 12, 1968: An intense blizzard visited most of South Dakota and Minnesota on the 12th and 13th of December. The storm began in the western part of South Dakota on the morning of the 12th then spread into the eastern part of the state and west central Minnesota by that afternoon, where it continued into the morning of the 13th. Freezing rain preceded snow, and in west central Minnesota, with thunder and lightning as well. Winds of over 50 mph caused blowing and drifting snow, which occasionally reduced visibilities to near zero. Gusts reached 70 mph in many places. Temperatures were falling to near zero during the day also resulted in dangerously low wind chills, particularly in Minnesota. The eastern half of South Dakota into west central Minnesota experienced the most severe blizzard conditions. Many schools were closed, and most other activities were greatly curtailed.

Automobile accidents were numerous across the area. Multiple utility lines were downed, and power and telephone outages were numerous due to the high winds. Power outages from less than an hour up to 12 hours were common across Minnesota. Snowfall ranged from around one inch in western South Dakota, to five inches in eastern South Dakota, to five to ten inches in west central Minnesota. One death in South Dakota was attributed to the storm when a man died of exposure to the cold near Allen in southwest South Dakota. In Minnesota, one man was found frozen to death near his car after it had run into the ditch several miles northwest of Boyd in Lac Qui Parle County. Another man was killed by a train when his vehicle became stalled on a railroad crossing at Hancock. 5 inches of snow fell at Watertown, Sisseton, and Webster with 6 inches at Clear Lake.

December 12, 1967: From December 12th through the 20th, Flagstaff, Arizona, a series of snowstorms buries Flagstaff with nearly 85 inches of snow.

1882 - Portland, OR, was drenched with 7.66 inches of rain, a record 24 hour total for that location. (12th-13th) (The Weather Channel)

1960 - The first of three Middle Atlantic snowstorms produced a foot of snow at Baltimore MD. A pre-winter blizzard struck the northeastern U.S. producing wind gusts as high as 51 mph, along with 16 inches of snow at Nantucket MA, and 20 inches at Newark NJ. (David Ludlum)

1969 - The worst tornado of record for western Washington State tracked south of Seattle, traveling five miles, from Des Moines to Kent. The tornado, 50 to 200 yards in width, began as a waterspout over Puget Sound. One person was injured and the tornado caused half a million dollars damage. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - While a developing winter storm began to spread snow across New Mexico into Colorado, high winds ushered unseasonably cold air into the southwestern states. Winds in California gusted to 60 mph in the Sacramento River Delta, and in the San Bernardino Valley. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Cold arctic air spread from the Great Lakes Region to the Appalachian Region. Twenty-five cities, mostly in the northeastern U.S., reported record low temperatures for the date. The low of 12 degrees below zero at Albany NY was their coldest reading of record for so early in the season. Saranac Lake NY was the cold spot in the nation with a low of 28 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - A winter storm produced snow from northern Mississippi to the Middle Atlantic Coast, with 10.5 inches reported at Powhatan VA. Heavy snow whitened the Black Hills of South Dakota, with 36 inches reported at Deer Mountain. Thirteen cities in the north central U.S., from Minnesota to Texas, reported record low temperatures for the date, including Duluth MN and Yankton SD with morning lows of 22 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1995 - A severe coastal storm is blamed for five deaths and loss of power to over one million people in Oregon and Washington. Winds at Sea Lion Caves near Florence topped out at 119 mph before problems developed with the anemometer. In Newport, a gust of 107 mph occurred downtown, while Astoria and Cape Blanco also had gusts of over 100 mph. Astoria's air pressure dropped as low as 28.53 inches, an all-time record (and comparable to the central pressure of a Category 2 hurricane!). Gusts in the Willamette Valley exceeded 60 mph.

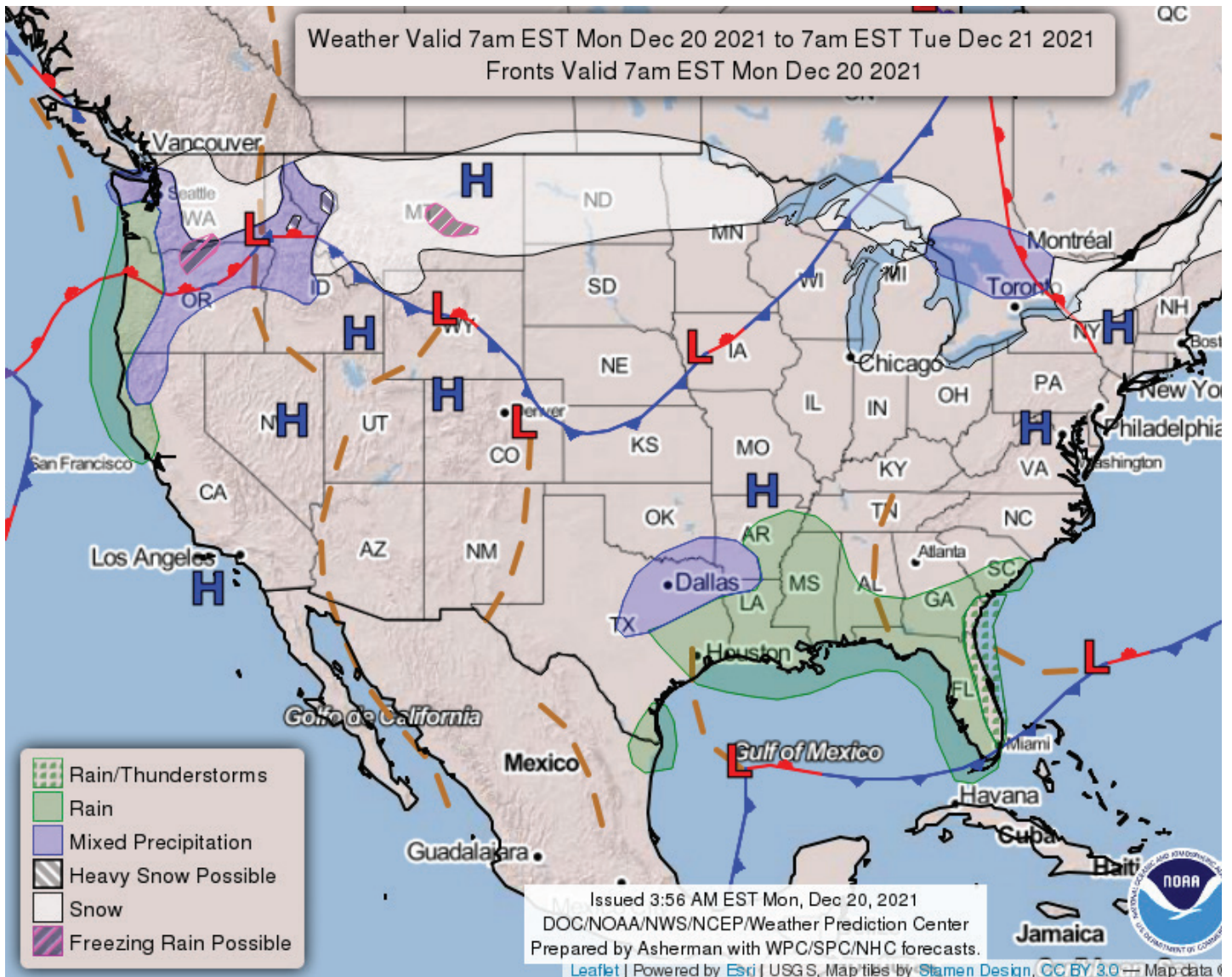
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 30 °F at 4:09 PM
Low Temp: 8 °F at 12:00 AM
Wind: 28 mph at 5:49 AM
Precip: 0.00

Record High: 60° in 1893
Record Low: -29° in 1916
Average High: 27°F
Average Low: 7°F
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.38
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.47
Average Precip to date: 21.59
Precip Year to Date: 20.03
Sunset Tonight: 4:53:19 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:07:37 AM





The Joy That Comes From Christmas

A young run-away girl collapsed on the streets of a large city at the beginning of the Christmas season. She was rushed to a hospital, placed in intensive care, and finally made it to a room where she made slow progress in regaining her health.

One evening a group of carolers stopped by her room and sang the beautiful songs that describe the birth of Jesus. After they sang, a young lady approached her bed and asked if she knew the Baby that they had been singing about.

Quietly, barely above a whisper, she said, "I heard about Him when I went to Sunday school. But don't remember too much about Him."

The young lady reminded her of the story and the meaning of the birth of Jesus and the plan of salvation. When she heard the story, she accepted the Lord as her Savior.

Finally, it was time for her to leave and a nurse said, "Well, now that you're better, it's time for you to leave."

Happily, she said, "Yes, but I'm not leaving alone. I'm taking Jesus with me. Do you know Jesus?"

"Oh, yes," replied the nurse, in a grumpy voice.

"Well, then," she asked, "why aren't you filled with joy like I am? If you truly know Jesus, you'll be happy all the time."

David said, "Restore to me the joy of Your salvation!"

Prayer: Lord, sometimes we surrender our joy to the stress and strains of life. Come now and return the joy we once had when we accepted Christ as our Savior. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Psalm 51:12 Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, And uphold me by Your generous Spirit.

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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

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News from the Associated Press

Pine Ridge teacher imparts Lakota language, music to classes

By MICHAEL NEARY Rapid City Journal

PINE RIDGE, S.D. (AP) — When Tristiana Brewer studies Lakota Language and Culture at Pine Ridge High School with her teacher, Will Peters, she scrutinizes the small details. Then, before long, larger worlds start to open up.

"My favorite part is learning the language and then seeing all the stories that come behind the language," she said.

Brewer is a junior at Pine Ridge High School and an enrolled member of the Oglala Lakota Nation, as is Peters. Her love for the tiniest parts of language and her appreciation of the worlds that lie behind the words are qualities that Peters also described on a recent afternoon at the high school, the Rapid City Journal reported.

Peters, who grew up on the Pine Ridge Reservation, is a Lakota Studies teacher at Pine Ridge High School and sponsor for the Pine Ridge Flute Society.

"I don't start with stories," he said, in reference to the Lakota Language and Culture class. "I start with basic knowledge of the Lakota language."

That includes, he said, looking closely at vowel sounds, consonant sounds and the sounds indicated by accent marks. His students pick up on the close analysis, using words such as "guttural" with ease in conversation.

"We progress into the origin stories of the Lakota people while still incorporating the Lakota language," he said. "From there, there's a story for almost everything I teach."

Drums, flutes, songs – all of them have origin stories, the kinds of narratives behind the individual words that Brewer described. And for Peters, the participation of students such as Brewer is vital.

"In my classes, I encourage students to express themselves, whether it's in the form of a question or a statement," he said. "The voices of the youth matter – a lot. They matter to me, they should matter to my people, they should matter to this country. Unless we all plan on living forever and being in charge of everything, these young people are going to be the ones."

Peters teaches Lakota Language and Culture, as well as Lakota Arts. The Lakota Arts class, he said, includes beadwork, music and many other topics and activities.

"It's all tightly interwoven," he said, "just like the web on a dream catcher."

The course activities create emotional reactions, often linked closely with intellectual ones. John Henry Long, a senior at Pine Ridge High School, and one of Peters' students, said he was drawn to the process of beading for its calming influence.

"It keeps my mind off things and makes me feel relaxed," said Long, an enrolled member of the Oglala Lakota Nation. "And there's no stress involved with it."

Brewer noted the richness of the process, as well, including learning the "four direction colors" and the meanings behind them.

Peters began teaching at Pine Ridge High School in 1996 and paused in 2004 when he was elected as a tribal council representative. He returned to the high school in 2008 and has been teaching there ever since.

"I couldn't get back fast enough," he said. "Young people are so much easier to work with than adults."

The topic of young people and their importance sends Peters' mind spiraling deep into Lakota language and history, and far into the future.

"I tell these young people, when we're learning language, there's a word for where they're at in this life right now," he said. "For the young women, they're called "Wikoskalaka," which means young women. For the young men, they're known as "Koskalaka."

The elders, he said, call both young women and young men "Wakanyeja."

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"Wakanyeja means 'Sacred Beings,'" he said. "And I always remind them of that. They are sacred beings." Peters underlined the importance of teaching Lakota language and culture.

"There have been things like colonization and forced assimilation," he said. "Those things have resulted in a lot of families who don't know the Lakota culture."

As Peters talked, he continually gravitated toward reflection about – and celebration of – young people. He noted just a bit of his own accomplishments, mentioning that he's "a NAMMY award-winning singer-songwriter," referring to the Native American Music Awards. But he quickly pivoted back to his students, describing the Pine Ridge Flute Society, which he advises and helped to launch several years ago.

"My students are NAMMY-award winning flutists," he said. "The Pine Ridge Flute Society, with their first recording, won the NAMMY for the (2018) Best Flutist of the Year. Nine members of the Flute Society were comfortable enough to record."

Other members of the society also produced powerful music, he explained, but with the descent of COVID-19 the chance to perform and promote the music suddenly vanished – at least for a time.

Peters said he grew up with music, especially with traditional Lakota songs that involved the drum.

"Later on in my youth, one of my older brothers had a rock band," he said. "He was a singer, and I kind of gravitated toward that genre of music and self-taught myself the drums, being tutored by my oldest brother.

At 14, he learned to play the guitar with help from his brother and other musicians, "all the while maintaining my involvement with Lakota music."

Peters said he's long felt drawn to a range of music, from traditional Lakota music to contemporary rock.

"I'm convinced that every form of music allows for expression – self-expression," he said. "And I dare say that's why people listen to music, no matter what genre it is, because the artist is expressing something that is relevant."

Peters grew up on the Pine Ridge Reservation and relishes his decision to stay there, and to continue to call it home.

"I'm a life-long resident of this place, and I'll be buried here," he said. "The world has nothing to offer me that I don't already have here. Some people are mistakenly under the belief that those of us who live here are trapped here. That we can't make it out there. I live here by choice.

"I have three college degrees, and I know I can make it out there anyplace," continued Peters, who's also a state-certified Lakota language teacher. "I know I can compete with anybody out there. But my choice is to stay here with my people – specifically these young people, and to help empower them."

Peters doesn't object when young people decide to move away to other places, but he expressed deep certainty that Pine Ridge is his home. He recalled advice from the elders he knew as a child.

"When I was growing up, they told us to get educated and help our people," he said. "So I'm following what the elders of my time passed down to me."

Traveling woodworker crafts ornaments featuring every county

By CURT NETTINGA Huron Daily Plainsman

HURON, S.D. (AP) — It began, as almost all really great things do, with the germ of an idea. But this is a germ which, during the time of COVID, flourished and etched itself into many families' histories, across the state.

"I've always had this urge to do a tree in the Capitol in Pierre during the holidays," said Huron craftsman Steve Riedel. "And for some time, I've had a desire to do something with wood from our family's homestead, down around Ramona."

What became of the merging of those two is the most unique of stories. A story about so much more than wooden ornaments, the Huron Daily Plainsman reported.

Steve Riedel is a craftsman and woodworker, who does some astounding wood carving, some remarkable painting and also writes. "The idea to do a tree at the Capitol has been in here for a while," he said, tapping the right side of his head. "We have always really enjoyed going to see the trees at the Capitol

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each year and I just always thought it would be neat to decorate one."

While that idea germinated, Riedel retired from his position at Our Home, Inc., and was faced, as most retirees are, with the question of 'What do I do now?' He had gathered some wood – red cedar - from the family homestead, posts cut and placed by his grandfather in the early 1900s, and decided to put a piece on his wood lathe and see what emerged. It turned into a pair of similar hanging ornaments, rich in color and capturing the grain of wood more than 120 years old.

That result stirred up the flame on the ember for the Capitol tree idea. "Just doing a tree at the Capitol would be great, but we really wanted to do something unique," Steve said. Eventually, the idea of creating ornaments for all 66 of South Dakota's counties floated to the surface, then morphed into creating each ornament from wood that was actually from that county.

"We went to some friends of ours here in Beadle County and started off there," Steve's wife Marietta said. "We thought people might think we were kinda crazy. But they thought it was a marvelous idea and we got our first piece of donated wood from them." That donation became a candy cane, Steve's first, and got the ball rolling.

"Would you be able to help me with a small project, please?"

To get wood from each of South Dakota's counties, one has to actually go to each county. And while the Riedel's have friends in many places, not all were good wood sources. The strategy became: find an interesting farm - "someplace with character," Marietta said – and simply knock on the door. Over the seeking process, Marietta said they became better at spotting places with more potential.

They started in early 2020 and had garnered some nice donations when the pandemic struck.

"So, we were pretty much closed in here and had a lot of time on our hands," Steve said. He turned and finished ornaments and Marietta navigated trips – mostly out and back in a day – to gather more wood. "We looked to find a place where two or three counties would come together," Steve said, "to limit the amount of travel needed."

They developed a bit of a feeling about places that may yield good finds, and an approach that helped thaw natural resistance from homeowners. "Let's face it," Steve said, "we took precautions, but some of this took place as COVID was getting going."

What they developed was an approach that asked for a little help with their project. What they found, according to Steve, was "an outpouring of trust and generosity, from people we had never met before, but helped us and allowed us, in many cases, to become a part of their family's story."

While Steve was creating ornaments, and amid the road trips, a booklet was born. In it, there are photos of each county's ornaments – many have more than one – that are on the tree, a mention of the type of wood, if known, the donors and what the wood was used for in a previous life.

Copies of the booklet are with the tree in Pierre, for people to look through and get a better understanding of what they are seeing.

But books are finite. The stories of the people they met and where the wood donations came from could fill volumes.

"None of the wood is new," Steve said. "When I was growing up, my mother always said we should 'make due' with what we have. So that's what I wanted to do here. I was looking for wood with a past, however humble." What the Riedels found were more than five dozen new friends across the state, with nearly as many stories.

"There was this one older guy," said Steve - beginning this particular memory as he does many of the others – "and while he was interested, he was not willing to give up anything for the project." A three-foot piece of old fence post? "No, I may have a use for that," was the consistent answer," Steve said. But the retired farmer wandered down to his old shop and told Steve he just may have something he could part with.

"He took down a complete double-tree horse hitch," Steve said. "'Here, I guess you can take this,' he said." Steve told the farmer that he couldn't take something like that – something that had value both as a keepsake to the farmer and more. "But he insisted," Steve said. "He did end up giving me the old post,

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which I turned for the ornament. I couldn't bring myself to cut the hitch apart."

The Riedels walked through many tree strips with land owners, gathering wood from various storage piles – "and old manure spreaders," Steve noted. "For some reason a lot of old wood was sitting in retired manure spreaders."

Two other memories that stand out among the dozens created from their "South Dakota Road Trip," are from a stop in Haakon County, in the middle of western South Dakota. It was there that they were given a piece of fence – likely pine – by Jerry and Joy Jones. The wood, according to the Jones, was from a post that was split by Jerry's grandfather Tom Berry, who later became South Dakota's Governor.

Another stop found them at a homestead where the people were willing to help, but were on their way to another engagement.

"So the husband just said, 'There's a pile of old wood down on the side of the barn and another behind the granary. Just go and take whatever you need. Your idea sounds great!'"

"It's hard to imagine telling two strangers to just take what they want and then leaving them at your home," Steve said.

"This started out to be something I wanted to do," Steve said. "But it turned into so much more about what I... what we, got out of it. We created some wonderful times together in our state, when we otherwise would have been shut up at home, we met many, many wonderful people. It really was a lesson on how wonderful and generous people of this state are."

In Moody County, walnut trees planted by a donor's great-grandfather yielded some beautifully grained, dark hardwood, which Riedel eventually married with a lighter wood collected from an additional donor in the area, to create a two-toned ornament.

"The trees were old and had died," Steve said, "and I was thankful to get some pieces from him. Then he asked us to come in the house." What they found inside were an impressive run of cabinets, a huge old farm table and a large kitchen island, all made of solid walnut from those trees.

"Wood has a connection and a history," Steve said. "Wood is warm."

The Riedel's children – a son lives in Hot Springs and their daughter is in Denver – were able to join them in Pierre last month to decorate the tree. "We were having fun, sharing some of the stories with the kids," Marietta said.

Steve added that he learned a great deal about family histories and how someone's great-grandfather had worked with wood. "It was an opportunity to display a tiny slice of our state's history, generously shared with us by people from every county," he said. "It was just a wonderful experience. And it was far more fun than I ever imagined. I am fortunate and blessed to have been able to do this."

Firefighters battle overnight blaze at South Dakota lodge

CUSTER, S.D. (AP) — Authorities say numerous fire departments worked through the night to put out a fire at a popular 85-year-old lodge in the Black Hills of South Dakota.

Two firefighters received minor injuries in the blaze at Sylvan Lake Lodge in Custer State Park. No guests of the multi-story hotel were hurt, according to the Custer Volunteer Fire Department.

Firefighters discovered a "free burning fire" when they arrived at the lodge Saturday night, authorities said. They encountered heavy smoke and flames extending to the roof.

The stone-and-timber lodge was built in 1937, funded in part through Depression-era New Deal programs. A wing of additional rooms was added in 1991. The original Sylvan Lake Hotel was a stopping point for adventurers looking to climb Black Elk Peak, the highest point in America east of the Rockies, according to the lodge's website.

Alarms initially went off in the southeastern part of the building, authorities said. Freezing temperatures, narrow roads covered with ice and snow, and darkness added to the difficulty of dealing with the blaze. About two dozen agencies responded to the fire.

Thirty-one cabins are nearby, all within close access to Sylvan Lake.

Authorities asked people to steer clear of the area where Custer firefighters said on social media that

a massive cleanup effort is required.

Pro-Beijing candidates sweep Hong Kong elections

By ZEN SOO Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — Pro-Beijing candidates dominated Hong Kong's legislative elections, beating out moderates and independents in the city's first public poll after Beijing passed a resolution to amend the city's election laws.

Candidates loyal to Beijing won a majority of the seats in Sunday's election after the laws were changed to ensure that only pro-Beijing "patriots" could run the city.

Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam said during a news conference Monday she was "satisfied" with the election despite a 30.2% voter turnout — the lowest since the British handed Hong Kong over to China in 1997.

She said that the number of registered voters reached 92.5%, a record high compared to the 2012 and 2016 elections, when around 70% of voters had registered.

"For registered voters, deciding whether they want to exercise their voting rights in a particular election is entirely a matter for themselves," she said.

"In this election, 1.35 million voters cast their votes. They did not just return candidates of their choice to LegCo, and I think it was also because of their support for the improved electoral system," said Lam, referring to the city's Legislative Council.

Under the new laws, the number of directly elected lawmakers was reduced from 35 to 20, even as the legislature was expanded from 70 to 90 seats. Most of the lawmakers were appointed by largely pro-Beijing bodies, ensuring that they make up the majority of the legislature.

All candidates were also vetted by a largely pro-Beijing committee before they could be nominated.

Lam said that even if there was a high turnout based on "poor politics," such as the political polarization during the period of political strife in 2019, that is "not something we should be glad to have."

Starry Lee, an elected pro-Beijing legislative council candidate from the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong party, said the 30% turnout was within "general public expectation."

"As I have mentioned before, this is a new system, this is a system that we call patriots administrating Hong Kong," Lee said.

"This is a different one from the previous one, therefore you cannot compare directly. And I believe that with the new system, people need time to get used to that."

The opposition camp has criticized the elections, with the largest pro-democracy party, the Democratic Party, fielding no candidates for the first time since the 1997 handover.

Lam said she expects that work with the 90 legislators will be "very exciting" because they have different opinions on many social issues.

Lam was expected to travel to Beijing later Monday on a duty-reporting trip, which she says is to give a full account to Beijing of the latest political and economic situation in Hong Kong.

"I expect to cover a wide range of issues on this particular duty visit because through two very decisive acts of the central authorities, Hong Kong is now back on the right track of 'one country, two systems,'" she said.

Israel to ban travel to US, Canada over omicron variant

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israeli ministers on Monday agreed to ban travel to the United States, Canada and eight other countries amid the rapid, global spread of the omicron variant.

Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's office announced the decision following a Cabinet vote.

The rare move to red-list the U.S. comes amid rising coronavirus infections in Israel and marks a change to pandemic practices between the two nations with close diplomatic relations. The U.S. will join a growing list of European countries and other destinations to which Israelis are barred from traveling, and from which returning travelers must remain in quarantine.

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A parliamentary committee is expected to give the measure final approval. Once authorized, the travel ban will take effect at midnight Wednesday morning.

Israel has seen a surge in new cases of the more infectious coronavirus variant in recent weeks, and began closing its borders and restricting travel in late November. Foreign nationals are not allowed to enter, and all Israelis arriving from overseas are required to quarantine — including people who are vaccinated.

Other countries that were approved to be added to the travel ban starting Wednesday are Belgium, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Morocco, Portugal, Switzerland and Turkey.

Israel rolled out a world-leading vaccination campaign early this year, and more than 4.1 million of Israel's 9.3 million people have received a third dose of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine.

In a prime-time address on Sunday, Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett urged parents to vaccinate their children, declaring that the country's "fifth wave" of coronavirus infections had begun. As of Sunday, Israel's Health Ministry has reported 175 cases of the new variant.

Israel has recorded at least 8,232 deaths from coronavirus since the start of the pandemic.

More than 200 dead after typhoon slams Philippines

By JIM GOMEZ Associated Press

MANILA, Philippines (AP) — The death toll following the strongest typhoon to batter the Philippines this year has risen to more than 200, with 52 other people still missing and several central towns and provinces grappling with downed communications and power outages and pleading for food and water, officials said Monday.

At its strongest, the typhoon packed sustained winds of 195 kilometers (121 miles) per hour and gusts of up to 270 kph (168 mph) before it blew out Friday into the South China Sea.

At least 208 people were killed, 52 remained missing and 239 were injured, according to the national police. The toll was expected to increase because several towns and villages remained out of reach due to downed communications and power outages although massive clean-up and repair efforts were underway.

Many died due to falling trees and collapsing walls, flash flood and landslides. A 57-year-old man was found dead hanging from a tree branch and a woman was blown away by the wind and died in Negros Occidental province, police said.

Governor Arlene Bag-ao of Dinagat Islands, among the southeastern provinces first hit by the typhoon, said Rai's ferocity on her island province of more than 130,000 was worse than that of Typhoon Haiyan, one of the most powerful and deadliest typhoons on record and which devastated the central Philippines in November 2013 but did not inflict any casualties in Dinagat.

"If it was like being in a washing machine before, this time there was like a huge monster that smashed itself everywhere, grabbed anything like trees and tin roofs and then hurled them everywhere," Bag-ao told The Associated Press by telephone. "The wind was swirling north to south to east and west repeatedly for six hours. Some tin roof sheets were blown away then were tossed back."

At least 14 villagers died and more than 100 others were injured by flying tin roofs, debris and glass shards and were treated in makeshift surgery rooms in damaged hospitals in Dinagat, Bag-ao said. Many more would have died if thousands of residents had not been evacuated from high-risk villages.

Like several other typhoon-hit provinces, Dinagat remained without electricity and communications and many residents in the province, where the roofs of most houses and buildings were ripped off, needed construction materials, food and water. Bag-ao and other provincial officials traveled to nearby regions that had cellphone signals to seek aid and coordinate recovery efforts with the national government.

More than 700,000 people were lashed by the typhoon in central island provinces, including more than 400,000 who had to be moved to emergency shelters. Thousands of residents were rescued from flooded villages, including in Loboc town in hard-hit Bohol province, where residents were trapped on roofs and trees to escape from rising floodwaters.

Coast guard ships ferried 29 American, British, Canadian, Swiss, Russian, Chinese and other tourists who were stranded on Siargao Island, a popular surfing destination that was devastated by the typhoon,

officials said.

Emergency crews were scrambling to restore electricity in 227 cities and towns, officials said. Power has been restored in only 21 areas so far. Cellphone connections in more than 130 cities and towns were cut by the typhoon but at least 106 had been reconnected by Monday, officials said. Two local airports remained closed except for emergency flights, but most others have reopened, the civil aviation agency said.

Bag-ao and other officials were concerned that their provinces may run out of fuel, which was in high demand due to the use of temporary power generators, including those used for refrigerated warehouses with large amounts of coronavirus vaccine stocks. Officials delivered vaccine shipments to many provinces for an intensified immunization campaign, which was postponed last week due to the typhoon.

At the Vatican, Pope Francis expressed his closeness Sunday to the people of the Philippines, referencing the typhoon "that destroyed many homes."

About 20 storms and typhoons annually batter the Philippines, which lies between the Pacific Ocean and the South China Sea. The Southeast Asian archipelago also lies along the seismically active Pacific "Ring of Fire" region, making it one of the world's most disaster-prone countries.

Military gives German hospital an edge in fighting COVID

By FRANK JORDANS Associated Press

WESTERSTEDE, Germany (AP) — As hospitals across Europe brace themselves for a surge in coronavirus cases over the holiday season because of the new omicron variant, Westerstede Clinical Center is cautiously hopeful it can weather the storm.

The region of northwestern Germany it mainly serves has among the lowest case numbers nationally, and an above-average vaccination rate.

"I think we're on a stable level here," said the head of the hospital's intensive care unit, Rene Lehr, when The Associated Press was recently granted rare access inside the facility.

The 43-year-old predicted his ICU might need to treat up to five COVID-19 patients during the period from Christmas to New Year — a number that staff can confidently handle.

In part that's because it enjoys benefits many other hospitals don't have. It is operated in cooperation between regional authorities and the German military, helping ensure it has state-of-the-art equipment, spare beds and additional staff who work there while they are on standby for possible troop deployments.

The military's vast resources — and its desire to keep medics at the cutting edge of their profession — mean this little-known facility was among the first in Germany to treat people with COVID-19.

In the spring of 2020 the German air force flew in patients from Italy, where hospitals were struggling to cope with a sudden influx of seriously sick people. The same happened recently, when Germany's eastern state of Saxony had more ICU patients than it could handle.

Yet even with the additional resources, Lehr and his staff can't perform miracles when it comes to COVID-19. Statistics suggest that one of the three severely ill patients who were being treated in the ICU on Friday won't recover.

The odds are worse for unvaccinated patients. While the hospital sees cases in people who have and haven't had the shot, those without the vaccination tend to be far worse off.

Among the vaccinated, those who need to be hospitalized either had their last shot a long time ago, are elderly, suffer from underlying conditions or received a vaccine other than those made by BioNTech-Pfizer or Moderna, which are mainly used in Germany.

Lehr has no doubt that vaccination is effective.

"Otherwise I believe that, given the (infection) numbers we currently have in Germany, the occupancy of ICU beds would be significantly higher than it already is," he said.

Despite recently seeing all-time records for the number of newly confirmed cases — topping 70,000 on a single day — the rate of hospitalization in Germany is lower than at the end of last year, when only a fraction of the population had been vaccinated.

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Those patients that end up in Westerstede's intensive care unit are cared for by people like Stefan, a senior nurse on the ward who asked not to publish his full name for privacy reasons and as it is standard protocol in the German military.

As a military nurse, Stefan has been deployed to Afghanistan, Kosovo and Mali, where he was when the pandemic started in early 2020.

"It was a bit surreal," he said of reading about the outbreak while on deployment to the North African nation.

"It wasn't till we got back to Germany and the case numbers started to suddenly rise, and the first patients came in, that we fully realized that was beginning to happen here," he recalled.

Like millions of health care workers around the world, Stefan found out how difficult it is to treat COVID-19, especially when wearing the protective equipment that medics have to put on every time they enter one of the isolation rooms where coronavirus patients are kept.

He says his military training helped, but acknowledges the strain his civilian colleagues are under; several have quit over the past two years, disillusioned by the burden placed on a profession that demands much but often pays comparatively little.

"It's a very arduous, demanding job," he said.

Still, Stefan said he was proud of what he and his colleagues have achieved during the pandemic.

"This was a very trying time for all of us, and it still is," he said. "The way the team stuck together and the camaraderie, I think that's going to stay with us for a long time after it all ends. If it ever ends."

"I think we're going to be dealing with this issue for a long time," he added. "I don't think this is going to be the last variant."

Lehr, the chief physician, agrees there's no telling what twist the pandemic will take next. After seeing its death toll from COVID-19 pass 100,000 and the imposition of new restrictions, daily case numbers have eased somewhat recently.

Still, the country's health minister warned Friday that "omicron puts everything we've seen during the pandemic so far in the shade." The Netherlands, which borders Germany just a few kilometers from Westerstede, on Saturday announced a new lockdown because of the variant.

"We live from one day to the next, one week to the next, and simply see which patients we get," said Lehr. "And the ones that come, we try to treat as best we can."

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

Peng Shuai tells paper she never wrote of being assaulted

BEIJING (AP) — Chinese tennis star Peng Shuai has denied saying she was sexually assaulted, despite a November social media post attributed to her that accused a former top Communist Party official of forcing her into sex.

The Lianhe Zaobao Chinese-language newspaper posted video of Peng it says was taken Sunday in Shanghai in which she said she has been mainly staying at home in Beijing but was free to come and go as she chose.

"First of all, I want to emphasize something that is very important. I have never said that I wrote that anyone sexually assaulted me. I need to emphasize this point very clearly," Peng told the newspaper's reporter.

The reporter did not ask how or why the lengthy and highly detailed Nov. 2 post appeared or whether Peng's account had been hacked.

The paper said it interviewed Peng at a promotional event for the Beijing Winter Olympic Games which begin Feb. 4. She was filmed on the observation deck of a facility where she watched a freestyle ski competition alongside former NBA star Yao Ming and other Chinese sports figures.

Peng dropped out of sight after the accusation against former Vice Premier Zhang Gaoli briefly appeared on her verified Weibo social media before being swiftly removed. Screen shots of the post were shared

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across the internet, drawing widespread concern about Peng's safety from politicians, fellow tennis stars and the Women's Tennis Association, which announced it was suspending all events in China indefinitely.

Following the posting, the three-time Olympian and former Wimbledon champion appeared standing beside a tennis court in Beijing, waving and signing oversize commemorative tennis balls for children. The foreign arm of state TV also issued a statement in English attributed to Peng that retracted her accusation against Zhang.

WTA chief executive Steve Simon questioned the emailed statement's legitimacy while others said it only increased their concern about her safety. In the Lianhe Zaobao interview, Peng said she wrote the statement in Chinese and it was later translated into English but that there was no substantive difference in meaning between the two versions.

Zhang, 75, was a member of the party's all-powerful Politburo Standing Committee until 2018 and a top lieutenant to president and party leader Xi Jinping. He has not appeared in public or commented on Peng's accusation.

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

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

The IOC has taken a different tack, with top officials saying they believe Peng is fine after video chatting with her.

The controversy surrounding Peng has added to protests over Beijing's hosting of the Winter Games because of the government's human rights abuses.

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

Jurors begin to weigh evidence in Elizabeth Holmes' case

By MICHAEL LIEDTKE AP Technology Writer

SAN JOSE, Calif. (AP) — The jurors now responsible for assessing 11 charges of fraud and conspiracy against former Theranos CEO Elizabeth Holmes are scheduled to begin their first full day of deliberations Monday. They have plenty of evidence to review after a three-month trial that captivated Silicon Valley.

That included the testimony of 32 witnesses — including Holmes herself — and more than 900 exhibits.

The eight men and four women on the jury took the weekend off after Judge Edward Davila handed them the case late Friday afternoon. They are charged with 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.

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.

In a dramatic turn on the witness stand last month, Holmes testified that her former lover and business

partner Sunny 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, her defense team did not mention the alleged abuse and its effects on Holmes during closing arguments.

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 he been called to testify. Balwani, 56, faces similar fraud charges in a separate trial scheduled to begin in February.

That leaves the jury to decide whether the alleged partner abuse may have affected Holmes' decisions at Theranos.

Abrams seeks national voting rights action before 2022 race

By JEFF AMY Associated Press

DECATUR, Ga. (AP) — Stacey Abrams, who built her national reputation by advocating for voting rights, is calling on Congress to take action on federal voting rules as the Democrat launches a second bid to become Georgia's governor.

Senators including Georgia Democrat Raphael Warnock, Abrams' close ally, have been arguing in recent days that the Senate must try again on federal voting standards, despite earlier setbacks.

In an interview Thursday with The Associated Press, Abrams said senators need to override Republican opposition to new federal voting guarantees by weakening the legislation-blocking filibuster to allow the Democrats' bare majority to pass new rules. Otherwise, Abrams said, more Republican-dominated state legislatures nationwide will adopt voting restrictions like Georgia did this year.

"Starting in January, when legislators come back into session in 2022, we're going to see a maelstrom of voter suppression laws. I understand the resistance to completely dismantling the filibuster. But I do believe there's a way to restore the Senate to a working body so that things like defending democracy can actually take place."

Abrams lost narrowly to Republican Brian Kemp in 2018 after becoming the first Black woman to ever become a major party's nominee for governor. She maintains that Kemp used his position as secretary of state to unfairly tip the scales in his favor by doing things like purging voters from the rolls. Kemp denies wrongdoing. Abrams' loss and her response, including forming a new voting group called Fair Fight, vaulted her to national prominence among Democrats.

This year, Republicans pushed through a new voting law in Georgia which, among other things, cuts days for requesting an absentee ballot, shortens early voting before runoff elections and limits drop boxes.

Democrats fear it will chip away at their gathering strength in Georgia, where President Joe Biden won the state's 16 electoral votes and then Warnock and fellow Democrat Jon Ossoff won runoffs in January, delivering control of the U.S. Senate to their party.

Republicans argue the law is fair to all and was necessary to restore confidence in the state's elections after claims of fraud by then-President Donald Trump inflamed many GOP voters. Those claims have been debunked and repeatedly rejected by courts.

Abrams insists she can still win election in Georgia next year even if there are no changes to its new law.

"I will do everything in my power to make certain that these new onerous voter suppression laws do not effectively block voters from their right to vote," she said. "And so yes, there's absolutely a pathway to win."

Abrams said that pathway leads in a different direction than the traditional approach to policy taken by Southern Republicans, instead seeking to improve the prospects of those who don't get a fair shot today.

"This is a state that is on the cusp of greatness. But we have high income inequality; we have low graduation rates relative to our capacity; we have a broken public health infrastructure system," Abrams said. "But we also have the ability, if we had good leadership, to invest in our communities, in all of our communities across the state."

Republicans are mobilizing against that approach, saying it would undermine freedom and the economy

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in Georgia, and that Abrams is just using Georgia as a stepping stone to run for president. Although she said she'd like to be president one day, Abrams pledges to serve a full term as governor.

In a lacerating attack on Kemp, Abrams argued he failed to recognize the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic and has been callous in his refusal to expand the Medicaid health insurance program to poor adults.

"Leadership is about leading. It's not about guessing, and more importantly, it's not about abdicating responsibility by saying everyone just figure it out," Abrams said. "If we wanted a system where everyone could figure it out, we wouldn't need to elect the governor."

Kemp maintains he's struck the right balance between health and the economy during the pandemic. He noted that he avoided unpopular lockdowns and that Georgia has a record-low unemployment rate right now.

But with former Sen. David Perdue challenging Kemp in the Republican primary, Georgia's 2022 governor's contest might not be an Abrams-Kemp rematch. Abrams said Thursday that she would focus on her campaign, saying she didn't know enough about Perdue to evaluate his record.

"I don't really know what it is, and I'm someone who's paid very close attention to politics," Abrams said.

In a year where national public opinion has turned sour on Biden and Democrats, Abrams believes she can still win. She said that's in part because Georgia is different, with a population on the cusp of becoming majority nonwhite, and because her approach is different, with a focus on "one Georgia" where she says "I'm going to talk to every community and I'm going to have plans for every community."

Republicans, though, maintain that Abrams will never overcome the tide of anti-Democratic sentiment and hope to lure wayward white suburbanites home, as well as pry away some African American, Latino and Asian voters.

Abrams is preaching patience to those communities.

"Winning an election isn't about magic," she said. "Voting isn't magic. It is medicine. It takes time, it takes effort, it takes continued investment."

The terrain that Abrams is campaigning on could change in other ways in coming months. Congress is considering creating a workaround to give health insurance to more people in states that have refused to expand Medicaid to poor adults. Extending Medicaid benefits has been the central focus of Democratic campaigns in Georgia for a decade. Abrams said she would celebrate if Congress expanded Medicaid, but said Georgia would still have a high uninsured rate and a troubled public health system.

The U.S. Supreme Court could clear the way for Georgia to ban abortions after six weeks of pregnancy. Passed in 2019, the law is currently on hold before an appeals court. Abrams called it a "forced pregnancy bill."

"I'm going to do everything in my power to ensure that no woman is forced to put her family, herself or her life in jeopardy, simply to satisfy the political whims of a conservative man who has never had to make that choice," she said.

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

Defiant in war and isolation, Hamas plays long game in Gaza

By JOSEPH KRAUSS and FARES AKRAM Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Each month, hundreds of trucks heavy with fuel, cement and other goods cross a plowed no man's land between Egypt and the Gaza Strip — and Hamas becomes stronger.

Hamas collects tens of millions of dollars a month in taxes and customs at the crossing in the border town of Rafah, according to estimates. The funds help it operate a government and powerful armed wing while international aid covers most of the basic needs of Gaza's 2 million residents.

That this is happening with the quiet acquiescence of Israel, which considers Hamas a terrorist group, might come as a surprise.

Israel says it works with Egypt to supervise Rafah in return for quiet. The opening of the crossing "was a common interest for all parties to ensure a lifeline for Hamas that would enable it to maintain calm

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in Gaza and prevent an explosion," said Mohammed Abu Jayyab, an economist and editor-in-chief of a business daily in Gaza.

But there's more to it. After surviving four wars and a nearly 15-year blockade, Hamas has only become more resilient, and Israel has been forced to accept that its sworn enemy is here to stay.

It has largely accepted Hamas' rule in Gaza because a prolonged invasion is seen as too costly. At the same time, Hamas furnishes Israeli leaders with a convenient boogeyman -- how can the Palestinians be allowed statehood if they are divided between two governments, one of which steadfastly opposes Israel's very existence?

Meanwhile, Hamas' willingness to use violence — in the form of rockets, protests along the border or incendiary balloons — has helped it to wrest concessions from Israel.

"Hamas stuck to its position and the Israeli government made a lot of compromises" after the war in May, said Omar Shaban, a Gaza-based political analyst. "Hamas was stubborn."

MILLIONS EACH MONTH

After Hamas seized power from the Palestinian Authority in 2007, Israel and Egypt imposed a punishing blockade aimed at preventing the group from arming. A massive economy based on smuggling tunnels sprang up in and around Rafah. Hamas levied taxes on goods that were brought in.

Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi ordered the tunnels destroyed after leading the 2013 overthrow of an Islamist government that had been sympathetic to Hamas. But four years and another Gaza war later, Egypt agreed to Hamas' demands to open an above-ground commercial crossing.

Imports through Gaza's only other functioning commercial crossing — with Israel — are already taxed by Israeli authorities, who transfer some of the revenues to the Palestinian Authority, so Hamas can only exact small tariffs without noticeably inflating prices. Rafah belongs to Hamas.

Hamas does not release figures on public revenues or expenses. An Egyptian government media officer did not respond to a request for comment.

Some 2,000 truckloads of cement, fuel and other goods entered through Rafah in September, nearly twice the monthly average in 2019 and 2020, according to Gisha, an Israeli rights group that closely monitors the Gaza closures.

Rami Abu Rish, the managing director of the crossings at the Hamas-run Economy Ministry — who used to supervise tax collection from the tunnels — says authorities derive no more than \$1 million a month from the Israeli crossing and up to \$6 million from Rafah.

But the Palestinian Authority's Finance Ministry estimates Hamas derives as much as \$30 million a month, mainly from taxes on fuel and tobacco coming in through Rafah, according to an official who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss internal figures.

A cigarette importer in Gaza — who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of jeopardizing the trade — said a small group of merchants imports 9,000 to 15,000 crates of cigarettes through Rafah each month, with Hamas charging \$1,000 to \$2,000 per crate. That alone would bring in \$18 million on average.

Abu Jayyab, the Gaza economist, estimates Hamas makes up to \$27 million a month. That's in addition to taxes and customs paid on cement and fuel.

Mohammed Agha, whose family owns a chain of gas stations in Gaza, was one of the few businessmen who agreed to speak publicly about Hamas' management of the crossings. He said gas station owners are forced to buy most of their fuel from the supplies coming through Rafah because Hamas benefits from the trade.

He said Hamas jailed him for two months in 2019 when he protested the arrangement.

"We as businessmen are sustaining the government" as the wider economy suffers, he said. "Before Hamas, 1,000 shekels (about \$320) a month was enough for a family to get by. Now, 5,000 isn't enough because they tax the citizens."

The money Hamas collects could go to its estimated 50,000 civil servants or supporters of the political movement. Or it could be spent on Hamas' armed wing, which has improved its military capabilities with

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every war and fired over 4,000 rockets at Israel in 11 days last spring.

HAMAS AND ISRAEL

Hamas burst onto the scene during the first intifada, or uprising, in 1987. As the then-dominant Palestine Liberation Organization joined the nascent peace process with Israel, Hamas embraced armed struggle.

The militant group launched scores of attacks, including suicide bombings, in the 1990s and 2000s. Hundreds of Israelis were killed. The group called for Israel's demise and rejected peace negotiations. It adopted a more moderate political platform in 2017, but its goals hardly changed.

In 2006, Hamas won a landslide victory in Palestinian elections, igniting a bloody power struggle with President Mahmoud Abbas' Fatah party. Hamas seized power in Gaza the following year, confining his authority to parts of the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

Abbas' peaceful approach has spared the West Bank from war and isolation, but he has been powerless to end the 54-year military occupation or stop the expansion of Jewish settlements. There have been no substantive peace talks in over a decade, and Israel's current prime minister, Naftali Bennett, is opposed to Palestinian statehood.

By contrast, Israel withdrew all its settlers and troops from Gaza in 2005 — after a second and more violent Palestinian uprising — and its soldiers cannot enter without risking war.

Israel refuses to talk to Hamas, but over the last decade it has negotiated a series of informal cease-fires through Egyptian, Qatari and U.N. mediators in which it has eased the blockade in return for calm.

Bassem Naim, a senior Hamas official, attributes much of his group's popularity to "the failure of the other project," referring to the Western-backed Palestinian Authority.

"The majority of Palestinian factions believe that resistance, and particularly armed resistance, has to be one of the tools in our struggle for freedom." He said the easing of the blockade "doesn't address the root of the problem, which is the siege and the occupation."

Bennett was an outspoken critic of the previous government's policy of allowing Qatar to send suitcases of cash into Gaza through an Israeli crossing.

But within months of becoming prime minister, the payments to needy families resumed through a U.N.-run voucher system, and Qatar resumed its contribution to the Hamas-run government's payroll in the form of fuel.

Israel denies it has given in to Hamas' demands. The new government says it has modified policies to try to ensure that humanitarian aid bypasses Hamas while responding militarily to even minor attacks.

All construction materials — including those brought in through Rafah — are imported through a monitoring system established with the U.N. and the PA after the 2014 war. Israel says it is barring all new, large construction projects until a deal is reached to return two captives and the remains of two Israeli soldiers held by Hamas since 2014.

Restrictions on so-called dual-use items that could be used for military purposes are in place at both the Israeli and Egyptian crossings, said Abu Rish, the Hamas crossing official.

A senior Israeli Defense Ministry official said the goal is to maximize humanitarian aid while minimizing the risk that it benefits Hamas. The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity in line with regulations, would only say that Israel is aware of the Rafah imports, and is relying on Egypt to ensure that the same restrictions are in place there as there are at the Israeli crossing.

'THE OTHER CHOICE IS NOT BETTER'

Even as Hamas generates revenue for its government and from the crossings and taxing businesses, the international community sustains the people of Gaza.

U.N. agencies have spent more than \$4.5 billion in Gaza since 2014, including \$600 million in 2020 alone. Most of that funding goes through the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees, which provides food aid, health services and operates schools for some 280,000 children.

The wealthy Gulf state of Qatar has sent \$1.3 billion to Gaza since 2012 to fund reconstruction and

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health services, including \$500 million pledged after the May war.

The largesse can be seen in Gaza City, where Qatari funds were used to build a scenic seaside promenade and expand a main road that runs past a Qatari-funded housing complex and the Qatari diplomatic mission, which resembles an embassy.

On the surface it all looks very prosperous, with families strolling past beach cafes, amusement parks and even a handful of luxury hotels. But the new construction is merely a backdrop to the grinding living conditions endured by most Gazans.

Unemployment hovers around 45% and nearly three out of five Gazans live in poverty, the World Bank reported in November. The average Gazan only has 13 hours of electricity a day and tap water is undrinkable.

Still, there has been almost no public opposition to Hamas within Gaza because Palestinians see no viable alternative. The Palestinian Authority has come to be seen by many as a corrupt, authoritarian extension of Israeli rule.

Mkhaimar Abusada, a political science professor at Gaza's Al-Azhar University, said the absence of protests "doesn't mean the Palestinians in Gaza are happy with Hamas."

He attributed the lack of visible opposition to Hamas' violent crackdown on protests over taxes and the rising cost of living in 2019, as well as the PA's failures.

"The other choice is not better than Hamas," he said. "Fatah and the PA are still seen by the Palestinian people as a very corrupted organization."

A poll this month found that despite the deprivations wrought by the confrontations between Hamas and Israel, 47% of Gazans would vote for Hamas if parliamentary elections were held, compared to just 29% who would vote for Abbas' Fatah.

Hamas isn't going anywhere. And Israel knows it.

"They are facing a number of problems here," Abusada said. "But resilience is part of their strategy. They're not going to give up."

Associated Press writer Helen Wieffering in Washington contributed to this report.

NHL stops cross-border games, shuts down 7th team

NEW YORK (AP) — The NHL and its players association temporarily clamped down on teams crossing the Canadian border and shut down operations of two more teams on Sunday for a total of seven in hopes of salvaging the season as COVID-19 outbreaks spread across the league.

The Detroit Red Wings and the Toronto Maple Leafs were added to the list of teams told to shut down operations, joining the Colorado Avalanche, Florida Panthers, Calgary Flames, Nashville Predators and Boston Bruins.

Canadian-based teams will not play U.S.-based teams from Monday through Thursday ahead of the league's holiday break (Dec. 24 through Dec. 26). Those postponed games are expected to be rescheduled.

The league said the decision was made, in part, because of the "fluid nature of federal travel restrictions."

"We will continue to play the 2021-22 regular season schedule," the NHL and NHLPA said Sunday in a joint statement. "Although there has been a recent increase in positive COVID test results among players, coaches and hockey staff, there have been a low number of positive cases that have resulted in concerning symptoms or serious illness."

All told, 27 games have been postponed through Saturday and 12 more through Thursday will be pushed to another date. Roughly 10% of the 700-plus players were in the league's virus protocol as of Saturday.

The Los Angeles Kings were supposed to host the Edmonton Oilers on Wednesday, but that's been postponed. Kings coach Todd McLellan said it's "a very uneasy time right now for the players and the people who are involved in the game."

"What's strange for us ... is that we have players for the most part that are feeling perfectly fine that are being pulled from the game. We've got a bit of a flu bug, cough, the typical winter stuff going through

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our team. Those players are playing, which is odd, but I get the protocols," he said. "I get the health directives, and I do believe we're in good hands."

McLellan added that it's difficult at this time of the year because "there's little ones at home with wives, and family becomes really, really important and we'll have a bunch of happy players that are getting on that plane, and the ones that we have to leave behind, we're going to get them home. We'll figure out a way."

The Winnipeg Jets were the only Canadian team playing Sunday -- hosting and beating the St. Louis Blues 4-2 -- after three games involving Canadian teams already were postponed.

"I think the big thing is when you win a hockey game you want to play the next day," Jets interim coach Dave Lowry said. "This will take us out of it for a couple days. But what it will allow us to do is get back and work on some details in our game that we hope to continue to improve on."

Jets center Mark Scheifele said the team learned of the postponements moments after the game.

"You never know right now," he said. "You could see it coming kind of, we weren't really sure, so obviously we know now and waiting to see what all transpires. We'll keep rolling with the punches."

All of the COVID-19 disruptions may lead to NHL players staying home instead of participating in the Winter Olympics in less than two months. The NHL has said players can compete in Beijing unless the coronavirus becomes a problem.

The league has until Jan. 10 to opt out of the Winter Games without financial penalty, but it retains the right to cancel its plans up until players are scheduled to travel to Beijing. The NHL and NHLPA said it will announce a final decision in the coming days.

Scheifele called the uncertainty "concerning."

"It's not in our hands anymore, you know what I mean? You just got to trust in the plan and just keep on doing what you do ... and hope for the best," he said.

Detroit's home game against Colorado on Monday had been postponed because of the Avs' COVID pause, and the Red Wings' trip to Minnesota for Thursday's game was called off. The Maple Leafs had only one game on the schedule ahead of the holiday break, but the cross-border decision already postponed it.

To slow the spread of the coronavirus, the NHL and the NHLPA agreed to daily testing and other enhanced protocols through Jan. 1, with an evaluation no later than Jan. 7. ____

AP freelance writer Rich Dubroff contributed to this report.

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

Schools use therapy-based programs for 'overwhelmed' kids

By LINDSEY TANNER AP Medical Writer

PAW PAW, Mich. (AP) — On a windy December morning in rural southwest Michigan, an American flag flapped at half-staff outside Paw Paw Early Elementary School. A social worker with a miniature therapy dog named Trixie offered comfort at the entry doors.

Children wearing face masks scampered off buses into the morning chill, some stooping to pet the shaggy pup before ambling inside.

Like kids in so many cities and towns around the globe, the youngsters in Michigan's Van Buren Intermediate School District have been through a lot these past few years. A relentless pandemic that continues to disrupt classrooms, sicken friends and loved ones, and has left some district families jobless and homeless. Three student suicide attempts since in-person school resumed full-time this fall, two student suicides last year. And now, a deadly shooting just two days earlier at a school a few hours away.

But with an infusion of federal COVID relief money and state funding this year plus a belief among local school officials that kids can't succeed academically if they are struggling emotionally, every child in this district's 11 schools is receiving extra help.

In a school year that was supposed to be a return to normal but has proven anything but, the district has launched an educational program based on a key component of modern psychology — cognitive

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behavior therapy. Principles of this method are embedded in the curriculum and are part of the district's full embrace of social and emotional learning.

Students in every grade are taught how thoughts, feelings and behaviors are linked and how learning how to control and reframe thoughts can lead to more positive outcomes. The program includes more intensive lessons for kids struggling with anxiety, depression or trauma, along with sessions on suicide prevention. All district employees learn about the concepts.

While schools in the U.S. and elsewhere are increasingly teaching social and emotional learning skills, many use a more piecemeal approach, creating a designated class for talking about feelings, or focusing that attention only on the most troubled kids. Many lack funding and resources to adopt the kind of comprehensive approach that Paw Paw and its neighbor schools are attempting, weaving evidence-based psychology methods into the curriculum and involving all students and staff.

Effective social and emotional learning doesn't happen "only at certain times of the day or with certain people," it should be reflected in all school operations and practices, said Olga Acosta Price, director of the national Center for Health and Health Care in Schools. With disruptions from the pandemic so widespread, that kind of approach is needed "now more than ever," she said.

As second-graders at Paw Paw Early Elementary sat crossed-legged on the floor on this December day, they received an introduction from their teacher and a video presentation, learning how to identify, manage and reframe "big" feelings like anxiety, anger and sadness.

The youngsters were given an example: Feeling angry and yelling at your mom because she forgot to buy your favorite breakfast cereal. That makes you more upset and your mom feel sad. Instead, remember that you also like waffles and could ask her nicely to make some, leading you both to feel happier as you begin your day.

At the adjoining elementary school for older grades, in a group session for more at-risk kids, four fifth graders practiced a mindfulness exercise, slowly breathing in and out while using a forefinger to trace up and down the fingers on the other hand. Behavior specialist Eric Clark, wearing a black face mask printed with the message, "Be Nice," led the session, calmly accepting a defiant girl's refusal to participate.

Clark said that since school resumed, he's seen kids with lots of anxiety, thoughts of self-harm and feeling "completely overwhelmed, they just don't want to do it anymore."

"I think we're starting to see some of the effects of the past few years," he said. "The extra stresses of not knowing what's next and not knowing if we're going to have school because we have too many cases or not knowing if another variant has come in or not knowing if somebody has a job still."

Clark said the psychology-focused program the district has adopted, dubbed "TRAILS" by its University of Michigan creators, is helping everyone manage the challenges.

"We can't control what's coming at us, but we can control how we respond to it," Clark said.

Abby Olmstead, a dark-haired, dark-eyed 10-year-old girl with a splash of freckles across her nose, says the finger-breathing exercise calms her and that working with Clark "has been helping me a lot."

"He always makes me laugh when I have anxiety, and that's not a bad thing," she said.

Her mom, Dawn Olmstead, said Abby struggled with online school last year and is learning how to better manage her frustrations.

"I definitely approve of what they're doing for social and emotional learning," Olmstead said. "If that was not there, you couldn't get down to the basics for my own daughter."

More than 1,000 district employees, even bus drivers, have received training in the program.

"From the superintendent on down to every staff person, we have said you need to know what makes kids tick," said Corey Harbaugh, Paw Paw schools' curriculum director. "You need to be better at that so that every adult a student comes into contact with — from the moment they get on a bus in the morning, the moment they get off in the afternoon — every adult has been trained and has been given some tools to work with kids around social, emotional skills."

Some parents have questioned the approach, arguing that their kids are "well-regulated" and don't need it. And some mistakenly think social and emotional learning is somehow related to a method of

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understanding American racism called critical race theory.

Harbaugh doesn't back down.

"We're very direct in saying we know this is good for kids. The research is there," he said.

Studies have shown that social and emotional learning programs can improve academic performance, classroom behavior and stress management. Research also suggests TRAILS lessons for at-risk kids can reduce depression and improve coping skills.

Almost 700 U.S. schools have paid contracts to receive support and implement the program. Its website provides free online materials that are downloaded more than 2,000 times daily, and users come from all over the world, said Elizabeth Koschmann, a University of Michigan researcher who developed the program. Those downloads have skyrocketed during the pandemic.

She said schools contact her almost daily, asking "how how they can possibly keep up with students who are falling apart, staff who are losing morale and experiencing tremendous burnout, and just a pervasive sense of exhaustion, despair, and hopelessness."

Evidence supporting the need for more attention to students' mental well-being is plentiful.

U.S. emergency rooms have seen a surge in kids with mental health crises including suicidal behavior, depression and eating disorders. Pediatric mental health therapists are scarce in many areas and kids often wait months for outpatient treatment.

In a December 7 public health advisory, U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy cited research showing that depression and anxiety symptoms doubled among youth worldwide during the pandemic. Expanding school-based programs is among his recommendations.

The American Academy of Pediatrics is among groups that recently made similar recommendations in declaring children's faltering mental health a national emergency.

With teachers and students all struggling with the effects of the pandemic, "more needs to be done," said Dr. Sara Bode, chair-elect of the academy's council on school health and a pediatrician at Nationwide Children's Hospital in Columbus, Ohio. Comprehensive programs are "critical because we cannot individually treat our way out of this crisis."

At Paw Paw Middle School, an emergency drill interrupted 8th graders writing down values and behavior they'd like to see in a social contract for the class. The drill gave students and administrators time to reflect on the recent school shooting in Oxford, Michigan, allegedly by a boy just a few years older than these kids.

Paw Paw students were told to seek the nearest classroom rather than flee outside, in case a shooter was positioned there.

Will Bowater, 13, said the reminders are stressful but that "it helps to know that there are people who are, like, collected enough to think about how to deal with stuff like that."

He said the school's focus on feelings and positivity is a good thing, even if "sometimes it does kind of sound, a bit, like, corny."

Harbaugh acknowledged it's a work in progress.

"If you come to look at our school, social, emotional learning and Paw Paw, we're not serving up a gourmet meal here," he said. "We're in the kitchen, there's flour everywhere, the eggs are broken and you know, we've got things in motion and the ovens are heating behind us. We're trying to figure it out. And we're going to keep at it."

Follow AP Medical Writer Lindsey Tanner at @LindseyTanner.

The Associated Press Health and Science Department receives support from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute's Department of Science Education. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

Manchin upends Biden's agenda, won't back \$2 trillion bill

By LISA MASCARO, ALAN FRAM and HOPE YEN Associated Press

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WASHINGTON (AP) — Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin all but delivered a death blow to President Joe Biden's \$2 trillion domestic initiative, throwing his party's agenda into jeopardy, infuriating the White House and leaving angry colleagues desperate to salvage what's left of a top priority.

The West Virginia senator's brazen announcement, delivered on "Fox News Sunday" after only a cursory heads-up to the president's staff, potentially derails not only Biden's "Build Back Better Act," but sparks fresh questions over passing voting rights legislation and potentially other significant bills that would require his vote in the 50-50 Senate.

Republicans heralded Manchin for a maverick move in joining all GOP senators now halting Biden's big social services and climate change package. But progressive Democrats mercilessly portrayed Manchin as a deal-breaker who failed to keep his word, and even moderates heaped on criticism after months of talks. Whether the senator, a lifelong Democrat, is making a definitive break from his party also became part of the discussion.

"We knew he would do this," tweeted Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, D-N.Y. Rep. Pramila Jayapal of Washington state, a leader of House progressives, said Manchin can no longer say "he is a man of his word."

"If he doesn't have the courage to do the right thing for the working families of West Virginia and America, let him vote no in front of the whole world," Sen. Bernie Sanders, the independent from Vermont who chairs the Budget Committee, said on CNN.

With Congress recessed for the Christmas holidays, the next steps are highly uncertain. Some Democrats insisted on recalling the Senate to session to force a vote, though that appeared unlikely. Others were fast at work trying to win back Manchin's support and pick up the pieces of what one aide compared to a jigsaw puzzle tossed on the floor. Biden's reputation as a seasoned deal-maker hung in balance.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi tried to strike an optimistic chord, assuring House Democrats and others that an agreement could still be reached early in the new year. Rather than denouncing Manchin — her statement Sunday night didn't mention him by name — Pelosi encouraged members of her caucus to highlight the measure's impact on constituents while "barnstorming" the nation in the weeks ahead.

"It is imperative that American families know how this once-in-a-generation investment in infrastructure will improve their lives," Pelosi said.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki unleashed an unusually hardball response to a lawmaker had been personally courted by the president, and whose vote is crucial.

"We will continue to press him to see if he will reverse his position yet again, to honor his prior commitments and be true to his word," Psaki said.

Manchin said on Sunday that after five-and-half months of negotiations among Democrats, "I cannot vote to continue with this piece of legislation."

Manchin said: "I can't get there."

While Manchin appeared steadfast in his opposition, his choice of words about this specific bill seemed to keep open the door to continued talks with Biden and fellow Democrats over reshaping it.

Yet the West Virginia senator all but said the bill would die unless it met his consistent demands for a smaller package — something that would be hard for many Democrats in the narrowly divided Congress to accept, even if they had few other options.

Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., a member of party leadership, said her fight for all the bill can provide "will not stop until it's on the President's desk."

The package would provide hundreds of billions of dollars to help millions of families by creating free preschool and bolstering child care aid. It would shore up federal subsidies for health insurance and expand access to Medicaid in states that have not done so.

There is more than \$500 billion for tax breaks and spending aimed at curbing carbon emissions, many key provisions Manchin specifically negotiated, which experts consider the largest federal expenditure ever to combat climate change.

Other provisions would limit prescription drug price increases, create hearing benefits for Medicare recipients and bolster aid for the elderly, housing and job training. Nearly all of it would be paid for with

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higher taxes on the wealthy and large corporations.

A potential new deadline for Biden and his party comes with the expiration of an expanded child tax credit that has been sending up to \$300 monthly directly to millions of families' bank accounts. If Congress fails to act, the money won't arrive in January.

Despite months of talks, negotiations between Biden and Manchin erupted this week, foreshadowing no year-end deal.

Psaki said in her statement that Manchin had "in person" given Biden a written proposal last Tuesday that was "the same size and scope" of a framework for the bill that Democrats rallied behind in October, and agreed he'd continue talks. That framework had a 10-year cost of \$1.85 trillion. Officials hadn't previously disclosed that Tuesday meeting.

There are different accounts of what transpired next, but the conversation did not go well. One person familiar with the closed-door talks said that after Manchin introduced the idea of cutting the child tax credit the conversation turned hot. The person insisted on anonymity to share details of the talks.

The Associated Press had previously reported Biden and Manchin moved further apart.

By Sunday, a Manchin aide gave the White House about a 20-minute notice before the lawmaker announced his position on national television, said another person familiar with the senator's actions who described them only on condition of anonymity.

Manchin's declaration was a stunning repudiation of Biden's and his party's top goal, calling to mind the famous thumbs-down vote by Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., that killed President Donald Trump's 2017 effort to repeal the health care law enacted under President Barack Obama. Other problems with Biden's package have arisen, caused by another moderate Democrat, Arizona Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, but Manchin's stands out.

South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham, top Republican on the Senate Budget Committee, had spent weeks trying to turn Manchin against the bill and said "I very much appreciate" Manchin's opposition.

A rejection of the legislation has been seen by many as unthinkable because of the political damage it could inflict on Democrats, particularly ahead of next year's midterm elections, when their control of Congress seems in doubt.

"Failure is not an option," said Rep. Suzan DelBene, D-Wash., who reiterated moderates' desire to see the bill refocused on fewer programs.

Manchin said he was opposing the 10-year, roughly \$2 trillion bill because of his concerns about inflation, growing federal debt and a need to focus on the omicron COVID-19 variant.

He also wants the bill's initiatives to last the measure's full 10-year duration, but that's a tall order — the Democrats specifically made many of them temporary to keep the bill's overall price tag closer to what Manchin said he could live with.

Democrats dismiss Manchin's assertions that the bill would fuel inflation and worsen budget deficits. They say its job training, education and other initiatives would spur economic growth and curb inflation long-term.

Associated Press writer Josh Boak in Wilmington, Delaware, contributed to this report.

Leftist millennial vows to remake Chile after historic win

By PATRICIA LUNA and JOSHUA GOODMAN Associated Press

SANTIAGO, Chile (AP) — Former leftist student leader Gabriel Boric will be under quick pressure from his youthful supporters to fulfill his promises to remake Chile after the millennial politician scored a historic victory in the country's presidential runoff election.

Boric spent months traversing up and down Chile vowing to bring a youth-led form of inclusive government to attack nagging poverty and inequality that he said are the unacceptable underbelly of a free market model imposed decades ago by the dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet.

The bold promise paid off. With 56% of the votes, Boric on Sunday handily defeated his opponent, far

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right lawmaker José Antonio Kast, by more than 10 points and at age 35 was elected Chile's youngest modern president.

Amid a crush of supporters in downtown Santiago, Boric vaulted atop a metal barricade to reach the stage where he initiated in the indigenous Mapuche language a rousing victory speech to thousands of mostly young people.

"We are a generation that emerged in public life demanding our rights be respected as rights and not treated like consumer goods or a business," Boric said. "We know there continues to be justice for the rich, and justice for the poor, and we no longer will permit that the poor keep paying the price of Chile's inequality."

In his speech, the bearded, bespectacled president-elect highlighted the progressive positions that launched his improbable campaign, including a promise to fight climate change by blocking a proposed mining project in what is the world's largest copper producing nation.

He also called for an end to Chile's private pension system — the hallmark of the neoliberal economic model imposed by Pinochet.

It's an ambitious agenda made more challenging by a gridlocked congress and ideological divisions recalling the ghosts of Chile's past that came to the fore during the bruising campaign.

Kast, who has a history of defending Chile's past military dictatorship, finished ahead of Boric by two points in the first round of voting last month. But his attempt to portray his rival as a puppet of his Communist Party allies who would upend Latin America's most stable, advanced economy fell flat in the head-to-head runoff.

Still, in a model of democratic civility that broke from the polarizing rhetoric of the campaign, Kast immediately conceded defeat, tweeting a photo of himself on the phone congratulating his opponent on his "grand triumph." He then later traveled personally to Boric's campaign headquarters to meet with his rival.

And outgoing President Sebastian Pinera, a conservative billionaire, held a video conference with Boric to offer his government's full support during the three-month transition. That will follow a runoff that saw 1.2 million more Chileans cast ballots than in the first round and raise turnout to nearly 56%, the highest since voting stopped being mandatory in 2012.

"It's impossible not to be impressed by the historic turnout, the willingness of Kast to concede and congratulate his opponent even before final results were in, and the generous words of President Pinera," said Cynthia Arnson, head of the Latin America program at the Wilson Center in Washington. "Chilean democracy won today, for sure."

In Santiago's subway, where a fare hike in 2019 triggered a wave of nationwide protests that exposed the shortcomings of Chile's free market model, young supporters of Boric waved flags emblazoned with the candidate's name while jumping and shouting as they headed downtown for his victory speech.

"This is a historic day," said Boris Soto, a teacher. "We've defeated not only fascism, and the right wing, but also fear."

Boric will become Chile's youngest modern president when he takes office in March and only the second millennial to lead in Latin America, after El Salvador's Nayib Bukele. Only one other head of state, Giacomo Simoncini of the city-state San Marino in Europe, is younger.

The new government is likely to be closely watched throughout Latin America, where Chile has long been a harbinger of regional trends.

It was the first country in Latin America to break with U.S. dominance during the Cold War and pursue socialism with the election of Salvador Allende in 1970. It then reversed course a few years later when Pinochet's coup ushered in a period of right-wing military rule that quickly launched a free market experiment throughout the region.

Boric's ambitious goal is to introduce a European-style social democracy that would expand economic and political rights to attack nagging inequality without veering toward the authoritarianism embraced by so much of the left in Latin America, from Cuba to Venezuela. It's a task made more urgent by the coronavirus pandemic, which sped up the reversal of a decade of economic gains.

Boric was able to prevail by expanding beyond his base in the capital, Santiago, and attracting voters in rural areas. For example, in the northern region of Antofagasta, where he finished third in the first round of voting, he trounced Kast by almost 20 points.

Also key to his victory were Chilean women, a key voting bloc who feared that a Kast victory would roll back years of steady gains. Kast, 55, a devout Roman Catholic and father of nine, has a long record of attacking Chile's LGBTQ community and advocating more restrictive abortion laws. One of his supporters even joked that

Boric, in his victory speech, promised that Chile's women will be "protagonists" in a government that seeks to "leave behind once and for all the patriarchal inheritance of our society."

Associated Press writer Patricia Luna reported in Santiago and AP writer Joshua Goodman reported from Miami.

Closing arguments set for ex-officer in Daunte Wright death

By AMY FORLITI and SCOTT BAUER Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Closing arguments are set for Monday in the manslaughter trial of the former Minnesota police officer who says she meant to use her Taser instead of her gun when she shot and killed Daunte Wright as he tried to drive away from a traffic stop.

Kim Potter's case will go to the mostly white jury after Judge Regina Chu gives them final instructions. The judge has already told jurors that she will not make them deliberate on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. They'll return after the holiday if they haven't reached a verdict by then.

The defense rested Friday after Potter told jurors that she "didn't want to hurt anybody," saying during her sometimes tearful testimony that she shouted a warning about using her Taser on Wright after she saw fear in a fellow officer's face.

Potter, 49, testified that she was "sorry it happened." She said she didn'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 April 11 death of Wright, a 20-year-old Black motorist who was pulled over in the Minneapolis suburb of Brooklyn Center for having expired license 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. After that initial encounter, the traffic stop "just went chaotic," she testified.

"I remember yelling, 'Taser, Taser, Taser,' and nothing happened, and then he told me I shot him," Potter, who is white, said through tears. Her body camera recorded Wright saying, "Ah, he shot me," 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 Sgt. Mychal Johnson was at risk of being dragged by Wright's car.

During cross-examination, prosecutor Erin Eldridge noted that Potter told a defense expert that she didn't know why she drew her Taser. Quoting from the expert's report, Eldridge said Potter told him: "I don't have an answer, my brain said grab the Taser." Potter testified she didn't recall saying that.

Prosecutors have argued that Potter had extensive training about Taser use and in use of deadly force, including warnings about confusing the two weapons. Eldridge got Potter to agree that her use-of-force training was a "key component" of being an officer. Potter testified that she was trained on when to use force and how much to use, and that there was a department policy that dictated what officers could or could not do.

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 their Tasers under high-stress situations because their ingrained training takes over.

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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 and there can be circumstances during a stressful situation in which someone's normal reactions may be "hijacked."

Some experts are skeptical of the theory. Geoffrey Alpert, a criminology professor at the University of South Carolina who is not involved in Potter's trial, has said there's no science behind it.

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.

Associated Press writers Tammy Webber in Fenton, Michigan, and Steve Karnowski in Minneapolis contributed to this report.

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

NBA postpones 5 more games; Young, Vogel enter protocols

By TIM REYNOLDS AP Basketball Writer

The NBA on Sunday postponed a total of five games involving nine teams in response to rising coronavirus numbers, raising the number of contests that have been pushed back this season to seven.

Called off were three Sunday games: Cleveland at Atlanta, Denver at Brooklyn and New Orleans at Philadelphia. Also shelved were Orlando's game at Toronto on Monday and Washington's game at Brooklyn on Tuesday.

The postponements came on the same day that Atlanta announced star guard Trae Young entered the league's health and safety protocols and the Los Angeles Lakers said coach Frank Vogel also was added to the list.

Leaguewide, through Sunday evening, there were at least 75 players from 20 teams who have either been ruled out to play — or in the case of the postponed games, would have been ruled out — because they are in the protocols. That number has soared in recent days, with the NBA just one of many sports leagues worldwide dealing with a rapidly worsening issue.

"This isn't going to go away today, tomorrow or the next day," Dallas coach Jason Kidd said Sunday. "This is going to be here for a while."

Anticipating that to indeed be the case, the NBA and the National Basketball Players Association agreed Sunday to a plan where, in response to the current wave of COVID-19 cases, teams will have roster flexibility and not have to worry about salary cap or luxury tax implications.

According to a memo sent to teams late Sunday night and obtained by The Associated Press, the NBA and union will allow teams to sign a replacement player for each player under contract who is confirmed positive for the virus.

U.S. officials are expecting a wave of breakthrough infections among the vaccinated given the surge of holiday travelers and gatherings expected in the coming days. The NBA has said 97% of players are fully vaccinated and somewhere around 60% had received boosters as of last week. It was not clear how many of the current positive cases involve those who are ineligible for a booster shot or those who have chosen not to receive one.

Kidd said that his team discussed concerns about COVID-related issues before his team played the Lakers — a team with multiple players in protocols — last week.

"We didn't have any COVID issues up to that point, until after they left," Kidd said. "Spoke too soon. And now we have COVID issues. We've got to just listen to the league and try to do the best that we can. It's not just us; you see games are being canceled."

Also not clear is how many of the NBA cases involve asymptomatic players. The NFL has revised its protocols so that only unvaccinated players and those experiencing possible symptoms of COVID-19 will be tested. The NHL has six teams shut down through Christmas because of outbreaks, and numerous

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college games at all levels have been canceled in recent days.

"It is what it is. Just trying to stay safe as possible and that's all you can do," Lakers guard Russell Westbrook said of the NBA's rising numbers. Westbrook was briefly in the protocols late last week, before returning at least three negative coronavirus tests and being cleared to return to play without missing a game.

The Cavaliers had five players enter the protocols on Sunday, the team said. All five — center Jarrett Allen, forwards Lamar Stevens and Dylan Windler and guards Denzel Valentine and RJ Nembhard — tested positive for COVID-19, according to a person who spoke to AP on condition of anonymity because the team did not release that specific detail.

They joined Isaac Okoro and Evan Mobley, who entered the protocols previously.

Vogel wasn't on the bench when his Lakers lost Sunday at Chicago. David Fizdale coached in Vogel's place. The Bulls returned to the court after having two games postponed last week.

Chicago still doesn't have all of its players back yet, either. Among those listed as out Sunday and still in protocols is Olympic gold medalist Zach LaVine.

"We've got to be able to manage and control frustration, anger, disappointment," Bulls coach Billy Donovan said. "That's not going to serve anything well. It's just not. The league is making decisions. We've got to follow protocol and keep each other safe."

A number of assistant coaches and referees are also in the protocols, along with the 75 players. Among the players added Sunday was Golden State's Andrew Wiggins, who was reluctantly vaccinated before the season to play home games in San Francisco.

In Phoenix on Sunday, officials Zach Zarba and Eric Dalen were both scheduled to work the Suns game against Charlotte but were later put into the protocols. Bill Kennedy was brought in to work the game as part of a two-man crew with Brent Barnaky.

Brooklyn has a league-high 10 players, plus some staff, in the protocols.

"It's just crazy," Nets forward Blake Griffin said.

Brooklyn's list of players in protocols includes Kevin Durant, James Harden and — even though he's still not yet able to play — Kyrie Irving, who has sat out all season for not complying with New York City's vaccine mandate. The team reversed course Friday and said Irving would be welcomed back "for games and practices in which he is eligible to participate," knowing he'd still miss two games at the Knicks and trips to Toronto and Golden State.

The Nets had eight available players for Saturday night's game against Orlando. The Magic had nine, including four players — Aleem Ford, Hassani Gravett, B.J. Johnson and Admiral Schofield — who were signed late last week to hardship contracts because of virus issues and injuries decimating Orlando's roster.

Magic coach Jamahl Mosley had all four on the court together in two separate stretches of Orlando's win.

AP Sports Writer Tom Withers in Cleveland contributed to this report.

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

Japanese space tourists safely return to Earth

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — A Japanese billionaire, his producer and a Russian cosmonaut safely returned to Earth on Monday after spending 12 days on the International Space Station.

Fashion tycoon Yusaku Maezawa, his producer Yozo Hirano and Russian cosmonaut Alexander Misurkin made a soft landing in a Russian Soyuz capsule in the steppes of Kazakhstan at 9:13 a.m. (0313 GMT) about 148 kilometers (about 92 miles) southeast of the city of Zhezkazgan.

Low clouds prevented the deployment of search-and-rescue helicopters to the area, so rescue teams reached the landing site in all-terrain vehicles to assist the crew and conduct medical check-ups. They reported that the trio was feeling fine.

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Maezawa, 46, and his 36-year-old producer Hirano were the first self-paying tourists to visit the space station since 2009. Misurkin was on his third space mission.

Speaking to The Associated Press last week in a live interview from the orbiting space station, Maezawa said that "once you are in space, you realize how much it is worth it by having this amazing experience."

Asked about reports claiming that he paid over \$80 million for the 12-day mission, Maezawa said he couldn't disclose the contract sum but admitted that he paid "pretty much" that amount.

In October, Russian actor Yulia Peresild and film director Klim Shipenko spent 12 days on the station to make the world's first movie in orbit, a project sponsored by Russia's space corporation Roscosmos to help burnish the nation's reputation for space glory.

Staying behind at the station are NASA astronauts Raja Chari, Thomas Marshburn, Kayla Barron and Mark Vande Hei; Russian cosmonauts Anton Shkaplerov and Pyotr Dubrov; and Matthias Maurer of the European Space Agency.

Speaking to the AP from orbit, Maezawa deflected criticism from those who questioned his decision to spend money on space travel instead of using it to help people back on Earth, saying that "those who criticize are perhaps those who have never been to space."

He said he felt "a little bit of motion sickness" and it was "a little bit difficult to sleep," adding that future space tourists should be prepared to spend up to five days adapting to zero gravity.

Maezawa said he was happy with the length of his trip, saying that "12 days was about right for me" to adapt to the motion sickness and enjoy the rest of the flight.

After asking the public for ideas before the flight, Maezawa had compiled a list of 100 things to do in space that included playing some sports inside the space station such as badminton, table tennis and golf.

Space Adventures, a Virginia-based company that organized his flight, previously sent seven other tourists to the space station between 2001 and 2009.

Maezawa made his fortune in retail fashion, launching Japan's largest online fashion mall, Zozotown. Forbes magazine has estimated his net worth at \$1.9 billion.

The tycoon has also booked a flyby around the moon aboard Elon Musk's Starship and will be joined on that trip by eight contest winners. He said he plans to undertake that mission in 2023.

Defectors from North Korea pray for resettlement victims

By CHISATO TANAKA Associated Press

NIIGATA, Japan (AP) — Eiko Kawasaki stood at the port of Niigata, the place from which she left for North Korea more than 60 years ago, and tossed chrysanthemum flowers into the sea to pray for her peers who could not come back. Then she burst into tears.

As a 17-year-old girl seeking a better life, Kawasaki joined a resettlement program led by North Korea that promised a "Paradise on Earth" — where everything was supposed to be free and those with Korean roots like her could live without facing discrimination.

Kawasaki was among some 93,000 ethnic Korean residents in Japan and their relatives who joined the program only to find the opposite of what was promised. Most were put to brutal manual labor at mines, in forests and on farms and faced discrimination because of Japan's past colonization of the Korean Peninsula.

One of the rare survivors who made it back to Japan, her birthplace, Kawasaki, now 79, is on a mission to keep alive the tragic stories and memories of the deceived "resettlement" victims.

She aspires to open a museum and revitalize a street in Niigata to commemorate the resettlement program under the auspices of Japanese and Korean friendship groups.

Kawasaki held a commemoration ceremony at the port in early December, marking the day the first ship left for North Korea 62 years ago. Participants offered a moment of silence to the victims who had perished despite their hopes of returning to Japan someday.

"Luckily, I came back to Japan alive. Since I consider my life here to be an extra bonus I've received, I want to devote all my time left to doing whatever I can do to make sure this tragedy does not happen again," Kawasaki said.

Born in Japan's ancient capital of Kyoto as a second-generation Korean, she was curious to see the

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much-touted but isolated communist country after studying at a pro-North Korean school. She says she was brainwashed.

Kawasaki had doubts about the promised future when her ferry arrived at a North Korean port and was met by hundreds of cadaverous people covered with soot from head to toe, she said.

"Everything looked completely black," she recalled. The third biggest international port in North Korea looked much shabbier than the Niigata port. "That moment I realized I had been deceived."

Then she saw her former schoolmate who had left for North Korea earlier, collecting leftover lunch boxes that Kawasaki and other passengers didn't finish. The schoolmate told her she should have eaten it because she wouldn't have access to such good food anymore.

"I was stunned and thought my heart would stop in shock," Kawasaki recalled.

Kawasaki was stuck in North Korea for more than 40 years until she fled in 2003 to Japan without telling anyone — including her family — "after seeing the bodies of those who died of starvation" during famines, she said.

Though Kawasaki is safe in Japan, she never feels at ease because she worries about her husband and children still in North Korea. Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, she has lost contact with them, and all the letters and packages she sent have been returned.

"My biggest worry now is their survival," Kawasaki said.

Kawasaki and other defectors want to rejuvenate a 1.5-kilometer (about 1 mile) stretch called "Bodnam," or willow street, by planting new trees to replace those that have withered or died since the resettlement program ended in 1984. Older trees were planted to mark the 1959 launch of the resettlement program.

"The street has gotten shabby because people paid little attention to the resettlement program or they couldn't care less about it. I thought I had to change that," said Kawasaki.

Among her supporters is Harunori Kojima, 90, a former communist who once backed the resettlement program.

Kojima said he wanted to join the Bodnam street project because of a sense of guilt and regret that he long supported the program despite knowing the severe conditions in the North.

He saw the reality during a 1964 trip to North Korea but "could not tell the truth" to those associated with the pro-Pyongyang organization or to his Japanese communist comrades. "That matter is still tormenting my heart."

Kojima published a book in 2016 including photos he took of those who left for North Korea, newspaper clips endorsing the program and letters he received from victims who yearned to return to Japan, as a way to document the history — and as atonement.

He noted the repatriation was strongly backed by Japan's government, Japanese media and many nonprofit organizations, including the International Committee of the Red Cross.

A 2014 United Nations Commission of Inquiry report described the victims of the resettlement program as "forcibly disappeared" people whom North Korea kept under strict surveillance, deprived of liberty and freedom of movement. It said many were likely to be among the first victims of the 1990s famines due to their lower social status.

Kawasaki and several other defectors are seeking damages in a lawsuit against North Korean leader Kim Jong Un over human rights violations they say they suffered under the resettlement program.

Kim is not expected to appear or compensate them even if the court orders it, but the plaintiffs hope the case can set a precedent for the Japanese government to negotiate with North Korea in the future on seeking the North's responsibility. A ruling is expected in March.

The wonder of a world illuminated for the holidays

By The Associated Press undefined

In the darkest days of the year, in a very dark time, there is a longing for illumination.

And so, all around the world, the holiday lights go on — some of them humble, some of them spectacular, all of them a welcome respite from the dark.

They make the streets an interactive experience. There are tunnels of light — to walk through, as

pedestrians do in Tokyo, at the zoo in Johannesburg, South Africa, and at the Holiday Road light show in Calabasas, California; to drive through, at a mall in Panay, the Philippines, where visitors remained in their cars to curb the spread of COVID-19.

There are real trees and manmade trees and ginormous trees, like the light sculpture in Vigo, Spain, said to be the biggest tree in the world, so big that adults and children stroll inside. Vigo goes all out for Christmas, stringing 11 million LED lights on more than 350 streets.

Some displays are municipal, like the silvery strings of light that adorn the lampposts of Moscow. Some are commercial, like the lights that wrap an electronics store in Syntagma Square in Athens, turning it into a massive giftbox. And some are private, like the over-the-top trimmings of homes in the Brooklyn, New York, neighborhood of Dyker Heights.

All are wonderful, in the most literal meaning of the word.

Is it possible that as the world struggles through its second Christmas season beset by disease, we need the lights to be brighter than ever? And so we spread them above like a celestial canopy in places from Barcelona, Spain, to the Old City of Damascus, Syria?

Is this how we rage against the dying of the light?

Guatemala town bids farewell to victim of Mexico truck crash

By SONIA PÉREZ D. Associated Press

GUATEMALA CITY (AP) — The body of Guatemalan migrant Daniel Arnulfo Pérez Uxla was laid out for the memorial service Sunday in his hometown of El Tejar, in the highland province of Chimaltenango.

Pérez Uxla was one of four migrants killed in a Dec. 9 truck crash in southern Mexico whose bodies were returned to their homeland Saturday. A total of 56 migrants died when a people smugglers' semi-trailer truck jammed with migrants overturned on a highway.

Pérez Uxla was a 41-year-old ironworker who left for the United States in hopes of paying off a mortgage on his home, after losing his job during the coronavirus pandemic.

His coffin was surrounded by white and yellow flowers and candles at his tin-roofed home. He left behind a wife and three children.

His wife, Mariela de Pérez, said he would be buried immediately Sunday. "I don't want to prolong the agony for everyone, especially for my children," she said.

His and three other migrants' bodies arrived on a charter flight from Mexico on Saturday and were taken in hearses to their hometowns for burial. The other three victims were from San Marcos province, on the border with Mexico.

They were identified as Leonel Estuardo Gómez Zepeda, Daymen Erick Fuentes Bravo, Cecilio Federico Ovalle Cifuentes.

Most of the 56 victims were believed to be from Guatemala, Honduras and the Dominican Republic.

De Pérez still had hopes of finding her husband alive, and she travelled to Mexico after word spread about the accident. After looking in all the hospitals in the Mexican city of Tuxtla Gutierrez, she finally found him in the last place she had wanted to go: the morgue.

"I found him two days after I arrived, in the morgue," she said.

De Pérez then went to the curve in the highway where the crash occurred, to light a candle for her husband.

"I am not Catholic, but my in-laws are, and I know they would have wanted me to light a candle at the spot where he died," she said.

In the town of Malacatán, in San Marcos province, Santos Gómez wept over the death of his son Leonel Estuardo Gómez Zepeda, who left behind four daughters.

"He had such high hopes," Santos Gómez said. "Here, you can only earn enough to eat, nothing more."

The elder Gómez said he heard about the crash on social media, and then had to identify his son's body.

Assistant Foreign Minister Eduardo Hernández said that so far six of the dead have been identified as Guatemalan citizens, and there is reason to believe 14 more are also Guatemalans.

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Authorities say fingerprints have been used to identify the bodies, as well as relatives' identification of their loved ones through photographs.

More than 100 migrants were injured in the crash. Some remain hospitalized in Mexico.

The truck was packed with as many as 250 migrants, and survivors said that speed and weight of the human cargo may have played a role in the crash.

Leftist millennial wins election as Chile's next president

By PATRICIA LUNA and JOSHUA GOODMAN Associated Press

SANTIAGO, Chile (AP) — A leftist millennial who rose to prominence during anti-government protests was elected Chile's next president Sunday after a bruising campaign against a free-market firebrand likened to Donald Trump.

With 56% of the votes, Gabriel Boric handily defeated by more than 10 points lawmaker José Antonio Kast, who tried unsuccessfully to scare voters that his inexperienced opponent would become a puppet of his allies in Chile's Communist Party and upend the country's vaunted record as Latin America's most stable, advanced economy.

In a model of democratic civility that broke from the polarizing rhetoric of the campaign, Kast immediately conceded defeat, tweeting a photo of himself on the phone congratulating his opponent on his "grand triumph." He then later traveled personally to Boric's campaign headquarters to meet with his rival.

Meanwhile, outgoing President Sebastian Pinera — a conservative billionaire — held a video conference with Boric to offer his government's full support during the three month transition.

Amid a crush of supporters, Boric vaulted atop a metal barricade to reach the stage where he initiated in the indigenous Mapuche language a rousing victory speech to thousands of mostly young supporters.

The bearded, bespectacled president-elect highlighted the progressive positions that launched his improbable campaign, including a promise to fight climate change by blocking a proposed mining project in what is the world's largest copper producing nation.

He also promised to end Chile's private pension system — the hallmark of the neoliberal economic model imposed by the dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet.

"We are a generation that emerged in public life demanding our rights be respected as rights and not treated like consumer goods or a business," Boric said. "We know there continues to be justice for the rich, and justice for the poor, and we no longer will permit that the poor keep paying the price of Chile's inequality."

He also gave an extended shout out to Chilean women, a key voting bloc who feared that a Kast victory would roll back years of steady gains, promising they will be "protagonists" in a government that will seek to "leave behind once and for all the patriarchal inheritance of our society."

In Santiago's subway, where a fare hike in 2019 triggered a wave of nationwide protests that exposed the shortcomings of Chile's free market model, young supporters of Boric, some of them waving flags emblazoned with the candidate's name, jumped and shouted in unison as they headed downtown to join thousands who gathered for the president-elect's victory speech.

"This is a historic day," said Boris Soto, a teacher. "We've defeated not only fascism, and the right wing, but also fear."

At 35, Boric will become Chile's youngest modern president when he takes office in March and only the second millennial to lead in Latin America, after El Salvador's Nayib Bukele. Only one other head of state, Giacomo Simoncini of the city-state San Marino in Europe, is younger.

His government is likely to be closely watched throughout Latin America, where Chile has long been a harbinger of regional trends.

It was the first country in Latin America to break with the U.S. dominance during the Cold War and pursue socialism with the election of Salvador Allende in 1970. It then reversed course a few years later when Pinochet's coup ushered in a period of right-wing military rule that quickly launched a free market experiment throughout the region.

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Boric's ambitious goal is to introduce a European-style social democracy that would expand economic and political rights to attack nagging inequality without veering toward the authoritarianism embraced by so much of the left in Latin America, from Cuba to Venezuela.

It's a task made more challenging by deepening ideological divisions unleashed by the coronavirus pandemic, which sped up the reversal of a decade of economic gains.

Kast, who has a history of defending Chile's past military dictatorship, finished ahead of Boric by two points in the first round of voting last month but failed to secure a majority of votes. That set up a head-to-head runoff against Boric.

Boric was able to reverse the difference by a larger margin than pre-election opinion polls forecast by expanding beyond his base in the capital, Santiago, and attracting voters in rural areas who don't side with political extremes. For example, in the northern region of Antofagasta, where he finished third in the first round of voting, he trounced Kast by almost 20 points.

An additional 1.2 million Chileans cast ballots Sunday compared to the first round, raising turnout to nearly 56%, the highest since voting stopped being mandatory in 2012.

"It's impossible not to be impressed by the historic turnout, the willingness of Kast to concede and congratulate his opponent even before final results were in, and the generous words of President Pinera," said Cynthia Arnsen, head of the Latin America program at the Wilson Center in Washington. "Chilean democracy won today, for sure."

Kast, 55, a devout Roman Catholic and father of nine, emerged from the far right fringe after having won less than 8% of the vote in 2017. An admirer of Brazil's far-right President Jair Bolsonaro, he rose steadily in the polls this time with a divisive discourse emphasizing conservative family values and playing on Chileans' fears that a surge in migration — from Haiti and Venezuela — is driving crime.

As a lawmaker he has a record of attacking Chile's LGBTQ community and advocating more restrictive abortion laws. He also accused Pinera, a fellow conservative, of betraying the economic Pinochet. Kast's brother, Miguel, was one of the dictator's top advisers.

In recent days, both candidates had tried to veer toward the center.

"I'm not an extremist. ... I don't feel far right," Kast proclaimed in the final stretch even as he was dogged by revelations that his German-born father had been a card-carrying member of Adolf Hitler's Nazi party.

Boric's victory likely to be tempered by a divided congress.

In addition, the political rules could soon change because a newly elected convention is rewriting the country's Pinochet-era constitution. The convention — the nation's most powerful elected institution — could in theory call for new presidential elections when it concludes its work next year and if the new charter is ratified in a plebiscite.

Associated Press writer Patricia Luna reported in Santiago and AP writer Joshua Goodman reported from Miami.

Sens. Warren and Booker test positive for breakthrough COVID

WASHINGTON (AP) — Sens. Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts and Cory Booker of New Jersey say they have tested positive for COVID-19, as the country deals with another surge in cases and the emergence of the omicron variant.

In separate statements Sunday, the Democrats said they had been fully vaccinated with two doses and a booster and their symptoms were mild. They also encouraged others to get the trio of shots if eligible.

Warren tweeted: "Thankfully, I am only experiencing mild symptoms & am grateful for the protection provided against serious illness that comes from being vaccinated & boosted."

She didn't elaborate on where she might have contracted the virus but said she's regularly tested and turned up negative for COVID-19 earlier this past week. Spokespersons for her office didn't respond to an email seeking comment Sunday.

Warren was at the U.S. Capitol this week along with other senators as Democrats seek to pass President

Joe Biden's \$2 trillion Build Back Better social and environment bill.

In a statement from his office, Booker said: "I'm beyond grateful to have received two doses of vaccine and, more recently, a booster — I'm certain that without them I would be doing much worse."

Rapper Drakeo the Ruler fatally stabbed at LA music festival

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A West Coast rapper known as Drakeo the Ruler was fatally stabbed in an altercation at a Los Angeles music festival where he was scheduled to perform, leaving fans of the young musician heartbroken.

A publicist for the rapper, Scott Jawson, confirmed his death on Sunday to the New York Times and Rolling Stone. The artist's real name was Darrell Caldwell.

Caldwell, 28, was assaulted Saturday night at the Once Upon a Time in LA concert, which was expected to feature several artists, including Snoop Dogg, 50 Cent and Ice Cube. Organizers called off the festival after the stabbing.

A fight broke out behind the main stage shortly after 8:30 p.m., leaving one man severely injured by a suspect wielding an edged weapon, the California Highway Patrol said in a bare bones news release that did not name Caldwell. The victim was taken to a hospital, where he later died.

The Los Angeles Police Department and Los Angeles Fire Department also responded.

LAPD spokesman Officer Luis Garcia told the Los Angeles Times that no arrests had been made as of Sunday.

Music journalists and fans delighted in Caldwell's unique sound and boundless creativity. His death highlighted the violent demise of other talented young Black musicians, including fellow LA rapper Nipsey Hussle in 2019 and the highly influential Tupac Shakur in 1996. Both men were shot.

Snoop Dogg posted on social media condolences to Caldwell's family and prayers to those affected by the tragedy. "I'm praying for peace in hip hop," he said.

Caldwell, who started releasing mixtapes in 2015 and this past February debuted his first album "The Truth Hurts," has been called "the most original stylist on the West Coast" for his darkly comedic lyrics and deadpan delivery. His mixtape "Thank You for Using GTL" contains verses recorded at the Men's Central Jail in Los Angeles.

He grew up listening to acts like Hot Boyz, Boosie, Webbie and Dipset, but said it was a battle rapper named Cocky who influenced him to rap.

"He was so smooth and calm while rapping, despite saying some of the craziest stuff," he told Billboard earlier this year. "It showed me you didn't have to yell or be loud to get your point across."

Caldwell pioneered a type of rap called "nervous music," with songs that were cryptic and dark, the Los Angeles Times wrote in 2018: "His cadences run counterclockwise to the drums, somehow both herky-jerky like a stickshift and swift and smooth like a luxury sports car it controls."

Caldwell was released from jail in November 2020 after reaching a plea deal with LA County prosecutors who wanted to try him on conspiracy charges in the 2016 killing of a 24-year-old man. Previously he had been acquitted of felony murder and attempted murder charges in the man's death.

The Once Upon a Time in LA Fest confirmed in an Instagram post that the event had been called off early, and did not give a reason.

The festival was organized by Live Nation, the Beverly Hills-based live events company that was behind last month's Astroworld music festival in Houston, Texas.

Ten people were killed and hundreds injured when a large crowd surged during a performance by the rapper Travis Scott.

In an email Sunday, Live Nation declined to elaborate on the altercation or provide details on security for the event.

What's going on with Ghislaine Maxwell's sex abuse trial?

By MALLIKA SEN Associated Press

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NEW YORK (AP) — The case for and against Ghislaine Maxwell has been made, and as soon as Monday, her fate will rest squarely in the jury's hands.

Maxwell, a socialite, has denied allegations from four women who say they were teens when she helped the wealthy financier Jeffrey Epstein sexually abuse them. Her lawyers say she has been wrongly targeted by prosecutors intent on holding someone — anyone — accountable after Epstein killed himself while awaiting trial on related sex-abuse charges.

The evidence phase of the trial concluded within three weeks. With just days left before a verdict is expected, it's time to take stock of developments.

WHO ARE GHISLAINE MAXWELL'S ACCUSERS?

The prosecution, mounted by the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York, hinges on the accusations of four women who say they were teenagers when Maxwell and Epstein sexually exploited them in the 1990s and early 2000s. Three testified under the pseudonyms Jane, Kate and Carolyn. One, Annie Farmer, decided to tell her story publicly.

WHAT WAS GHISLAINE MAXWELL UP TO BEFORE HER ARREST?

Maxwell was arrested in July 2020 — almost a year after Epstein killed himself in jail while awaiting trial. After Epstein's death, she withdrew from public activities like running an oceans charity. Her whereabouts became a subject of public speculation. Was that her eating a burger and reading a book on CIA operatives in Southern California? Was she living in Britain or Paris or maybe even Massachusetts? Prosecutors say she went into hiding in New Hampshire — where she was eventually arrested — in a million-dollar home where she kept her cellphone wrapped in foil.

SO HAS GHISLAINE MAXWELL BEEN IN JAIL THIS WHOLE TIME?

Yes, despite multiple requests for bail, Maxwell has spent well over a year lodged in federal lockup in Brooklyn. Maxwell has triple citizenship with the U.S., U.K. and France, the last of which does not extradite its citizens. Her attorneys and family have lambasted jail conditions, which they say are punitive and inhospitable to Maxwell's ability to mount a proper defense.

HOW EXACTLY DO YOU PRONOUNCE 'GHISLAINE'?

Think French. Hard "g," silent "s." First syllable: "ghee," like the clarified butter, and quick. Second syllable, like a country lane and slightly emphasized.

IS THE GHISLAINE MAXWELL TRIAL AIRING ON TELEVISION OR STREAMING?

No. It's in federal court, which doesn't allow cameras. That's why all the images from the courtroom are sketched.

WHEN DID TESTIMONY BEGIN?

Nov. 29.

HOW LONG DID IT TAKE PROSECUTORS TO MAKE THEIR CASE?

The prosecution's case lasted two weeks, across 10 days of testimony.

HOW LONG DID IT TAKE THE DEFENSE TO MAKE THEIR CASE?

Two days.

THAT'S IT?

Yes, the witness lists for both sides were greatly truncated. The whole trial was originally projected to last six weeks!

WHEN WILL GHISLAINE MAXWELL'S TRIAL BE OVER NOW?

It's hard to give a precise estimate, but closing arguments are set for Monday and the jury could get the case as soon as the end of that day. We might see a verdict as early as Christmas, which also happens to be Maxwell's 60th birthday.

WHY DIDN'T GHISLAINE MAXWELL TESTIFY?

When offered the chance, she told the judge — not without some defiance — that she had no need to testify, as the prosecution had failed to adequately prove their case. But regardless, it's rare for a high-profile defendant to put themselves on the stand, as it opens them up to a lot more scrutiny.

WHAT EXACTLY WAS GHISLAINE MAXWELL'S RELATIONSHIP WITH JEFFREY EPSTEIN?

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They were romantically involved, but at some point — the timeline is unclear — she says she transitioned to being more of an employee, running his households. Prosecutors have accused of her as functioning as Epstein's madam, procuring underage girls to satisfy him sexually.

WHERE DID JEFFREY EPSTEIN HAVE HOMES?

All over the place: Palm Beach, Florida; New Mexico; Manhattan; the U.S. Virgin Islands; Paris.

WHAT DID JEFFREY EPSTEIN DO FOR A LIVING?

He left his teaching career at a tony Manhattan prep school to work at Bear Stearns, an investment bank, and then started his own money-management business. He would not disclose his assets and income even after his July 2019 arrest, but he seems to have built a fortune managing investments for others.

HOW IS PRINCE ANDREW INVOLVED IN ALL OF THIS?

He's not. Not exactly, at least. A woman is suing the British royal, saying he sexually abused her when she was 17. She says Maxwell facilitated her meetings with Andrew, who has denied the account. But the woman's accusations have been left out of this trial. That lawsuit won't go to trial until at least late 2022. Andrew's name has come up in this trial, though: a pilot of Epstein's private jet, dubbed the "Lolita Express" by the news media, testified he had flown Andrew and an accuser confirmed she told the FBI she had flown with the prince, as well.

WHO IS GHISLAINE MAXWELL'S HUSBAND?

Also unclear! She was living with him when she was arrested in New Hampshire, but court documents have not made his name public. He did support her bail attempts, but has not been spotted at the trial.

DOES GHISLAINE MAXWELL HAVE ANY NOTABLE SUPPORTERS?

Her family — the scions of the late publishing magnate, Robert Maxwell — is sticking by her. Two of her siblings, Kevin and Isabel, have attended each day of proceedings. The Maxwells strongly assert the U.S. justice system is making a patsy of their youngest sister. Ghislaine is notably the baby of the family and said to have been the favorite of her father, who died falling off a yacht named for her.

WHO IS THE JUDGE FOR GHISLAINE MAXWELL'S TRIAL?

U.S. District Judge Alison J. Nathan, who was recently nominated by President Joe Biden to serve on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit. That promotion is not expected to interfere with proceedings in the Maxwell case, but the trial was in recess for the first three days of its third week so she could answer questions from the U.S. Senate panel charged with considering her elevation.

HOW HAS GHISLAINE MAXWELL BEEN SPENDING HER TIME IN JAIL?

According to a website set up by her family, Maxwell has been working through a pile of books. Her reading list runs the gamut of criminal-justice related books like the award-winning "Just Mercy" by Bryan Stevenson to "Licensed to Lie: Exposing Corruption in the Department Justice" by Sidney Powell, a conspiracy theorist and former lawyer for President Donald Trump. She's also been making her way through Philip Pullman's "His Dark Materials" fantasy series and popular book club fiction pick "Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine," by Gail Honeyman.

IF CONVICTED, HOW MUCH TIME IN PRISON WOULD SHE BE LOOKING AT?

Potentially many years.

LET'S REWIND: WHAT EXACTLY IS GHISLAINE MAXWELL CHARGED WITH?

This ongoing trial revolves around six charges:

1. conspiracy to entice minors to travel to engage in illegal sex acts
2. enticement of a minor to travel to engage in illegal sex acts
3. conspiracy to transport minors with intent to engage in criminal sexual activity
4. transportation of a minor with intent to engage in criminal sexual activity
5. sex trafficking conspiracy
6. sex trafficking of a minor

A superseding indictment in March also charged Maxwell with two counts of perjury, but the judge granted the defense's request to spin those off into a separate trial.

SO THERE'S MORE TO COME?

Yes. Regardless of the outcome of this trial, there's more to come.

Sen. Elizabeth Warren tests positive for COVID breakthrough

BOSTON (AP) — U.S. Sen. Elizabeth Warren said Sunday she has tested positive for COVID-19 as the country deals with another surge in cases and the emergence of the omicron variant.

The Massachusetts Democrat tweeted she's vaccinated, has received her booster shot and is experiencing mild symptoms in a breakthrough case of the virus.

"Thankfully, I am only experiencing mild symptoms & am grateful for the protection provided against serious illness that comes from being vaccinated & boosted," she wrote, using the occasion to also urge anyone not vaccinated to do so.

Warren didn't elaborate on where she might have contracted the virus but said she's regularly tested and turned up negative for COVID-19 earlier this week. Spokespersons for her office didn't respond to an email seeking comment Sunday.

Warren was at the U.S. Capitol this week along with other senators as Democrats seek to pass President Joe Biden's \$2 trillion Build Back Better social and environment bill.

Manchin not backing Dems' \$2T bill, potentially dooming it

By ALAN FRAM and HOPE YEN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin said Sunday he cannot back his party's signature \$2 trillion social and environment bill, dealing a potentially fatal blow to President Joe Biden's leading domestic initiative heading into an election year when Democrats' narrow hold on Congress was already in peril.

Manchin told "Fox News Sunday" that after five-and-half months of negotiations among Democrats in which he was his party's chief obstacle to passage, "I cannot vote to continue with this piece of legislation. I just can't. I've tried everything humanly possible. I can't get there."

Manchin's choice of words seemed to crack the door open to continued talks with Biden and top congressional Democrats over reshaping the legislation. But the West Virginia senator all but said the bill would die unless it met his demands for a smaller, less sweeping package — something that would be hard for many Democrats in the narrowly divided Congress to accept.

The bill would provide hundreds of billions of dollars to help millions of families with children by extending a more generous child tax credit, creating free preschool and bolstering child care aid. There is more than \$500 billion for tax breaks and spending aimed at curbing carbon emissions, which experts consider the largest federal expenditure ever to combat climate change.

Other provisions would limit prescription drug price increases, create hearing benefits for Medicare recipients and bolster aid for the elderly, housing and job training. Nearly all of it would be paid for with higher taxes on the wealthy and large corporations.

In an unusually hardball response to a lawmaker whose vote is crucial in the 50-50 Senate, White House press secretary Jen Psaki called Manchin's announcement "a sudden and inexplicable reversal in his position" and "a breach of his commitments" to Biden and congressional Democrats. She pointedly said that Manchin, whose state is among the nation's poorest, "will have to explain" why many families will have to cope with higher health and child care costs the bill is intended to address.

Psaki said in a statement that Manchin had "in person" given Biden a written proposal last Tuesday that was "the same size and scope" of a framework for the bill that Democrats rallied behind in October, and agreed he'd continue talks. That framework had a 10-year cost of \$1.85 trillion. Officials hadn't previously disclosed that Tuesday meeting.

"We will continue to press him to see if he will reverse his position yet again, to honor his prior commitments and be true to his word," Psaki said.

A Manchin aide gave the White House about a 20-minute notice before the lawmaker announced his position on national television, said a person familiar with the senator's actions who described them only on condition of anonymity.

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The legislation's collapse would deepen bitter ideological divisions between progressive and moderate Democrats. That would imperil the party's ability to get behind any substantial legislation before the November congressional elections, when their control of Congress seems in doubt. And it would add a note of chaos just as Democrats need to demonstrate accomplishments and show a united front to voters.

Manchin's declaration was a stunning repudiation of Biden's and his party's top goal, and its delivery — a last-minute heads up from a staffer — seemed little short of a slap in the face to Biden. A rejection of the legislation has been seen by many as unthinkable because of the political damage it could inflict on Democrats.

It is rare for a member of a president's own party to administer a fatal blow to their paramount legislative objective. Manchin's decision called to mind the famous thumbs-down vote by Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., that killed President Donald Trump's 2017 effort to repeal the health care law enacted under President Barack Obama.

Manchin's comments, as Congress was on a holiday recess, drew fury from Democratic colleagues he already has enraged and frustrated for months. Other problems have arisen, caused by another moderate Democrat, Arizona Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, and bickering between progressives and centrists, but none has approached the magnitude of Manchin's stands.

Senate Budget Committee Chairman Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., said in a written statement that if Manchin wants to oppose the legislation, "He should have the opportunity to do so with a floor vote as soon as the Senate returns." Rep. Pramila Jayapal of Washington state, a leader of House progressives, said Manchin can no longer say "he is a man of his word."

Senate Finance Committee Chairman Ron Wyden, D-Ore., said it would be "extremely disappointing" to abandon top priorities but that a package helping families, containing health care costs and creating clean energy jobs "would go a long way toward addressing our challenges."

Rep. Suzan DelBene, D-Wash., reiterated moderates' desire to see the bill refocused on fewer programs. "Failure is not an option," she said.

South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham, top Republican on the Senate Budget Committee, had spent weeks trying to turn Manchin against the bill by saying it was too expensive. "I very much appreciate" Manchin's opposition, Graham said.

Manchin said he was opposing the 10-year, roughly \$2 trillion bill because of his concerns about inflation, growing federal debt and a need to focus on the omicron COVID-19 variant. He accused Democrats in a written statement later of trying to "dramatically reshape our society in a way that leaves our country even more vulnerable to the threats we face," seemingly delineating an ideological gap between himself and his party.

He also wants the bill's initiatives to last the measure's full 10-year duration. Democrats made many of them temporary to limit the bill's cost, which Manchin says is misleading.

The bill's extension of enhanced child tax credit benefits, including monthly checks to millions of families, would only be extended one year. The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office projected the credit's full 10-year cost at \$1.6 trillion, nearly the size of the entire package Manchin says he'd accept. To fit, any compromise would likely have to reduce the tax credit's benefits and deeply cut many other proposals.

Democrats dismiss Manchin's assertions that the bill would fuel inflation and worsen budget deficits. They say its annual spending would be a tiny percentage of the country's \$23 trillion economy and have little impact on prices. Its job training, education and other initiatives would spur economic growth and curb inflation long-term, they say.

Democrats note that CBO estimated the bill's savings would leave it adding \$200 billion to federal deficits over the coming decade, small compared to the \$12 trillion in red ink already projected.

Associated Press writer Josh Boak in Wilmington, Delaware, and AP Congressional Correspondent Lisa Mascaro in Washington contributed to this report.

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Tiger & son's 11 straight birdies fall short of Daly duo

By DOUG FERGUSON AP Golf Writer

ORLANDO, Fla. (AP) — Tiger Woods might not be ready for tour-level golf. He can still deliver quite a show.

In a remarkable return from a car crash 10 months ago that badly damaged his right leg, Woods and 12-year-old son Charlie set a tournament record with 11 straight birdies and pushed John Daly and his college son all the way to the finish Sunday in the PNC Championship.

Daly and John Daly II, a freshman at Arkansas, shot 57 in the scramble format and won by two shots. It might have been the widest Woods ever smiled after a runner-up finish.

"The fact that I'm able to have this opportunity this year — even a couple weeks ago we didn't really know whether or not I would be doing this," Woods said. "But here we are. And we had just best time ever."

The birdie streak began on the seventh hole when Woods hit a half-wedge into a foot. Charlie holed a 10-footer on the next hole, stooping to pick up the marker before the ball was even in the cup, another moment where the confident son looked a lot like his father.

It was like that over the final two hours, Woods often hitting the key irons and Charlie making the putts. They briefly had the lead after a birdie on the 14th and the margin was thin the rest of the way until the very end.

Daly, playing two groups behind, birdied the 16th hole to regain the lead. He and his son stayed in front when Team Woods chipped too strong on the par-5 closing hole and each of them missed 8-foot birdie putts. They shot 57 with only four pars, two of them on par 5s.

"We thought we'd have to birdie every hole on the back nine, and it turned out to be that way," Woods said. "But man, what a blast it was. We just had a blast all day."

Daly and son two-putted for birdie on the 18th and set the record that mattered. They finished at 27-under par, breaking by one the mark set by Davis Love III and his son three years ago.

"Yesterday, it was all him. I putted so bad," Daly said. "I finally hit some decent shots. He played unbelievable. I played a little better today. I made him happy."

The most famous encounter between Woods and Daly was in 2005 at Harding Park in a World Golf Championship, which ended in a playoff when Daly three-putted from 15 feet.

Woods was charging again — Tiger and Charlie — except Team Daly didn't flinch. Daly hit 7-iron into the wind to short range on the 16th for birdie, and he coaxed in a 4-foot par putt on the 17th to stay ahead.

The most popular offseason event that pairs major champions and a family member suddenly felt tense on a warm Florida afternoon, all because of Woods and everything that led to him playing again.

Woods suffered multiple injuries to his right leg on Feb. 23 when his SUV traveling about 85 mph crashed through a median and down a hill in the Los Angeles suburbs.

He said amputation was a possibility. It took three months for him to get on his feet with help of crutches. And he ended the year in a Sunday red shirt, holing birdie putts and delivering short irons that led to one birdie after another and a chase that felt like old times.

This wasn't just about Woods. His son, playing this event for the second straight year, delivered the goods down the stretch, particularly a 5-iron to 4 feet on the par-3 17th that gave them a tie for the lead going to the 18th.

Team Daly held it steady behind them.

It was only one month ago when Woods first posted a three-second video showing him hitting a short iron with the message, "Making progress." He was hitting balls at the back of the range at Albany in the Bahamas two weeks ago. He was able to ride a cart at the Ritz-Carlton Golf Club Orlando, which helped him get by in the 36-hole event on a flat course.

He kept insisting that playing at a high level against the best players in the world is still a long way and a lot of work ahead of him.

But there was no shortage of birdies, big shots and loads of hopes for a fairy tale ending.

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"The competitive juices, they are never going to go away," Woods said. "This is my environment. This is what I've done my entire life. I'm just so thankful to be able to have this opportunity to do it again.

"Earlier this year was not a very good start to the year and it didn't look very good," he said. "But the last few weeks, to push as hard as we have the last seven months ... and to have this opportunity to be able to play with my son and to have these memories, it's worth all the pain."

For more AP golf coverage: <https://apnews.com/hub/golf> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

Fauci says omicron variant is 'just raging around the world'

By JOSH BOAK Associated Press

WILMINGTON, Del. (AP) — The COVID-19 omicron variant is "just raging around the world," the White House's top medical adviser said Sunday as President Joe Biden prepares to issue "a stark warning of what the winter will look like" for unvaccinated Americans.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the country's leading infectious disease expert, told NBC's "Meet the Press" that "the real problem" for the U.S. hospital system is that "we have so many people in this country who are eligible to be vaccinated who have not yet been vaccinated."

The prospect of a winter chilled by a wave of coronavirus infections is a severe reversal from the optimism projected by Biden some 10 months ago, when he suggested at a CNN town hall that the country would essentially be back to normal by this Christmas. Biden has been careful not to overpromise, yet confidence in the country has been battered by an unrelenting wave of COVID-19 mutations and variations that have left many Americans emotionally exhausted, dispirited and worried about infections.

Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, tried to defend the president's earlier promise in a separate interview Sunday on CNN's "State of the Union."

"The idea about hoping and having an aspiration to be independent of the virus after a period of time is understandable and reasonable," Fauci said. "But the one thing that we know from, now, almost two years' experience with this virus is that it is really very unpredictable."

With the threat that rising infections could worsen the supply chain challenges facing the United States and fuel inflation, Gov. Jared Polis, D-Colo., said Biden should stop talking about vaccination as two shots and a booster and instead call it "three doses" that are needed to maximize protection.

Polis pivoted to inflation that is running at a nearly four-decade high, saying Biden in his remarks on Tuesday about the omicron variant needed to show the country how he is addressing the rising cost of goods.

"We can do very concrete things that actually reduce the costs for Americans," Polis said on NBC, noting that Colorado is cutting vehicle registration fees and making it free to register a new business.

The administration is expecting a series of breakthrough infections with the surge of holiday travelers. Fauci said most people who have been vaccinated and gotten a booster should be fine if they take precautions such as wearing masks in crowded settings including airports.

Biden plans to speak Tuesday on the status of the fight against COVID-19 and discuss government help for communities in need of assistance, White House press secretary Jen Psaki tweeted. She also said he will be "issuing a stark warning of what the winter will look like for Americans that choose to remain unvaccinated."

Fauci was asked on CNN whether he expected a record numbers of cases — and what about hospitalizations and deaths. "Yes, well, unfortunately, I think that that is going to happen," he said.

Fauci told NBC the president would again urge people to get the booster shot, highlight increased availability of testing, discuss "surge teams" for besieged hospitals and explain how important it is to provide vaccines for the rest of the world.

"The one thing that's very clear, and there's no doubt about this, is its extraordinary capability of spreading, its transmissibility capability. It is just, you know, raging through the world, really," Fauci said. "And if you look even here in the United States, you have some regions that start off with a few percent of the

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isolates that are positive, now going up to 30%, 40%, and some places 50%.”

Psaki’s announcement Saturday on Twitter came after Vice President Kamala Harris said in a Los Angeles Times interview that the Biden administration “didn’t see delta coming. I think most scientists did not — upon whose advice and direction we have relied — didn’t see delta coming.” She added: “We didn’t see omicron coming. And that’s the nature of what this, this awful virus has been, which as it turns out, has mutations and variants.”

The vice president’s words raised doubts as to the administration’s strategy for addressing the pandemic. Biden had effectively declared independence from the virus at a White House celebration on July Fourth to mark progress with vaccinations inside the United States, yet the global nature of the pandemic meant that the disease could evolve as others around the world waited for immunization.

Fauci told NBC he saw the variants coming and he thought Harris’ statement “was taken a bit out of context,” adding he believed she was referring to “the extraordinary number of mutations ... particularly with omicron. No one had expected it that much but we were well-prepared and expected that we were going to see variants.”

Johnny Isakson, former Georgia Republican U.S. senator, dies

By JEFF AMY and RUSS BYNUM Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Johnny Isakson, an affable Georgia Republican politician who rose from the ranks of the state legislature to become a U.S. senator known as an effective, behind-the-scenes consensus builder, died Sunday. He was 76.

Isakson died in his sleep before dawn at his home in Atlanta, his son John Isakson told The Associated Press. He said that although his father had Parkinson’s disease, the cause of death was not immediately apparent.

“He was a great man and I will miss him,” John Isakson said.

Johnny Isakson, whose real estate business made him a millionaire, spent more than four decades in Georgia political life. In the Senate, he was the architect of a popular tax credit for first-time home buyers that he said would help invigorate the struggling housing market. As chairman of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, he worked to expand programs offering more private health care choices for veterans.

Isakson’s famous motto was, “There are two types of people in this world: friends and future friends.” That approach made him exceedingly popular among colleagues.

President Joe Biden, who served on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee with Isakson, said in a statement Sunday that he and the late senator “found common ground built on mutual respect for each other and the institutions that govern our nation.”

Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, a Kentucky Republican, on Sunday referred to Isakson as “one of my very best friends in the Senate.”

“His infectious warmth and charisma, his generosity, and his integrity made Johnny one of the most admired and beloved people in the Capitol,” McConnell said in a statement.

In 2015, while gearing up to seek a third term in the Senate, Isakson disclosed that he had been diagnosed with Parkinson’s, a chronic and progressive movement disorder that had left him with a noticeably slower, shuffling gait. Soon after winning reelection in 2016, he underwent a scheduled surgery on his back to address spinal deterioration. He frequently depended on a cane or wheelchair in later years.

In August 2019, not long after fracturing four ribs in a fall at his Washington apartment, Isakson announced he would retire at year’s end with two years remaining in his term.

In a farewell Senate speech, he pleaded for bipartisanship at a time of bitter divisions between Republicans and Democrats. He cited his long friendship with U.S. Rep. John Lewis, an Atlanta Democrat and civil rights hero, as an example of two men willing to put party aside to work on common problems.

“Let’s solve the problem and then see what happens,” Isakson said. “Most people who call people names and point fingers are people who don’t have a solution themselves.”

In his statement Sunday, Biden said, “In Johnny’s memory, let us heed the wisdom he offered upon

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retiring from the Senate.”

Lewis, who died last year, saluted Isakson on the House floor in 2019, saying, “We always found a way to get along and do the work the people deserve.”

An Atlanta native, Isakson failed in his first bid for elected office: a seat on the Cobb County Commission in 1974. Two years later, he was elected to the Georgia House of Representatives, becoming the only Republican to beat a Democratic incumbent in Georgia the same year Jimmy Carter was elected president. Isakson served 17 years in the state House and Senate. Always in the minority in Georgia’s General Assembly, he helped blaze the path toward the GOP ascendancy of the 2000s, fueled by Atlanta’s suburban boom. By the end of Isakson’s career, some of those same suburbs were swinging back toward Democrats.

“As a businessman and a gifted retail politician, Johnny paved the way for the modern Republican Party in Georgia, but he never let partisan politics get in the way of doing what was right,” Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp said in a statement.

Isakson suffered humbling setbacks before ascending to the Senate. In 1990, he lost the race for governor to Democrat Zell Miller. In 1996, Guy Millner defeated him in a Republican primary for Senate before Millner lost to Democrat Max Cleland.

Many observers chalked up the loss to Isakson not being tough enough on abortion. In the primary race, Isakson ran a television advertisement in which he said that while he was against the government funding or promoting abortion, he would “not vote to amend the Constitution to make criminals of women and their doctors.”

“I trust my wife, my daughter and the women of Georgia to make the right choice,” he said.

He later changed his mind on the contentious issue.

Isakson’s jump to Congress came about in 1998, when U.S. House Speaker Newt Gingrich decided not to seek reelection. Isakson won a 1999 special election to fill the suburban Atlanta seat.

He finally made it to the U.S. Senate in 2004 when he defeated Democrat Denise Majette with 58% of the vote. He served with Georgia senior Sen. Saxby Chambliss, a close friend and classmate from the University of Georgia.

Isakson was viewed as a prohibitive early favorite to succeed Republican Sonny Perdue in the governor’s mansion in 2010. But he opted instead to seek a second term in the Senate. While there, he developed a reputation as a moderate, although he rarely split with his party on key votes.

He was a lead negotiator in 2007 on immigration legislation that President George W. Bush backed but ultimately abandoned after it met strong resistance from the right. Isakson supported limited school vouchers and played a major role in crafting Bush’s signature education plan, the No Child Left Behind Act. He also pushed an unsuccessful compromise bill on the politically charged issue of stem cell research that would have expanded research funding while also ensuring that human embryos weren’t harmed.

That deal-making approach has fallen out of favor for many voters, but Isakson’s lineage remains a presence in Georgia politics. State Attorney General Chris Carr was the former senator’s chief of staff. “When I was a young man just getting started in politics, I wanted to be like Johnny Isakson,” Carr said Sunday.

Democratic Georgia Sen. Raphael Warnock said “all of Georgia” grieves Isakson’s death. Warnock, who took over Isakson’s old seat after defeating Republican Kelly Loeffler in a January runoff, had a special connection to Isakson, who attended an annual service in honor of the late Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. The church’s pulpit was King’s and later became Warnock’s.

Isakson’s “model of public service is an example to future generations of leaders on how to stand on principle and make progress while also governing with compassion and a heart for compromise,” Warnock said Sunday.

Isakson graduated from the University of Georgia in 1966 and joined his family-owned company, Northside Realty in Cobb County, a year later. It grew to one of the largest independent residential real estate brokerage companies in the country during his more than 20 years at the helm. Isakson also served in the Georgia Air National Guard from 1966 to 1972.

He is survived by his wife, Diane, whom he married in 1968; three children and nine grandchildren.

Bynum reported from Savannah, Georgia.

Vienna commemorates pandemic victims with a 'sea of lights'

VIENNA (AP) — Tens of thousands of Vienna residents turned out Sunday night to participate in a "sea of lights" commemoration for the more than 13,000 Austrians who have died in the coronavirus pandemic.

The event, supported by dozens of civil society organizations, drew more than 30,000 people, according to Austrian media.

They organized a chain of more than 13,000 candles stretching around Vienna's central ring road, one for each person who died in Austria, and observed a moment of silence.

The commemoration was also intended to show solidarity with health care workers following several weeks of anti-coronavirus demonstrations in the Austrian capital. On Saturday, tens of thousands again turned out to protest the government's pandemic-related restrictions, as well as a planned national vaccine mandate.

"We are simply people from civil society who want to send a signal," organizer Daniel Landau told the Austrian newspaper Kurier.

In addition to those who attended in person, many more — including Austrian President Alexander van der Bellen — shared photos of candles lit in their windows on social media with the hashtag #YesWeCare.

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

UK's Johnson walks tightrope between politics, COVID surge

By DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — British Prime Minister Boris Johnson is walking a political tightrope as he faces increasing attacks from both friends and enemies amid a surge in COVID-19 infections.

For the second winter in a row, Johnson is betting vaccines will be his savior, urging everyone to get booster shots to slow the spread of the new omicron variant, hoping to avoid further politically unpalatable restrictions on business and social activity.

The threat to Johnson and his Conservative Party was on stark display last week as the prime minister reeled from one political crisis to another.

On Tuesday, Johnson faced the biggest parliamentary rebellion of his tenure as 97 Conservatives voted against new COVID-19 restrictions. Two days later he suffered a stinging by-election defeat in a normally safe Conservative area amid anger over reports that government employees held Christmas parties last year while the country was in lockdown. Then Saturday, one of his staunchest allies resigned from his Cabinet, citing discomfort with the new coronavirus rules.

While Johnson's policy on trying to restrict COVID-19 infections is sound, he will face increasing pressure from all wings of his party to change course, said Giles Wilkes, a senior fellow at the non-partisan Institute for Government. The challenge is to ignore the political noise and base his policies on science, said Wilkes, a former adviser to the prime minister's predecessor, Theresa May.

"The past month's political spasms may mark a historical turning point in the story of this administration," Wilkes said, highlighting pivotal decisions of former Prime Ministers John Major and Gordon Brown that ultimately undermined their standing with voters. "Those are not happy comparisons for the prime minister to contemplate."

On Sunday, British newspapers were filled with reports on potential contenders for the prime minister's office, including Treasury Secretary Rishi Sunak, Foreign Minister Liz Truss and former Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt.

The pressure on Johnson is being stoked by the highly transmissible omicron variant, which has pushed Britain's COVID-19 infections to record highs in recent days. That has once again fueled concerns that U.K. hospitals will be overwhelmed this winter.

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In response, Johnson ordered the National Health Service to ramp up its vaccine program a week ago, promising that everyone 18 and over would be offered a booster shot this month. But he also introduced legislation requiring people to wear face masks in shops and to show they have been double-vaccinated or had negative COVID-19 test to enter crowded venues like nightclubs.

The results of Britain's vaccination program have been impressive, with the number of booster shots administered jumping to more than 900,000 on Saturday from 550,000 a week earlier. Some vaccination centers are staying open 24 hours a day to offer shift workers easier access.

But the new restrictions triggered howls from the libertarian wing of Johnson's party, who say they were unnecessary and the precursor to further limits on personal freedoms. In the face of that opposition, Johnson had to rely on votes from the opposition Labour Party to approve the use of COVID-19 health passports.

Now the government's scientific advisers are recommending that Johnson go further. Limits on social interactions and a return to social distancing are needed to prevent hospitals from being overwhelmed, according to leaked minutes from a meeting of the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies.

Tobias Ellwood, one of the Conservative rebels, criticized the government's "off the bus, on the bus" approach to tackling the pandemic, saying the country needs consistency.

"We need almost like a wartime leader, we need a strong No. 10, and the machinery of No. 10 around Boris Johnson. That's what needs to be improved," he told Times Radio. "The boosterism, the energy, is not enough in these current circumstances."

Meanwhile, Labour leaders say the "partygate" scandal has undermined public confidence in the Conservative government. It will be difficult for Johnson to impose any new coronavirus restrictions because government offices violated their own rules last year.

Government ministers met Sunday with the leaders of governments in Scotland and Wales to discuss "shared challenges, including the economic disruption caused by COVID." The meeting was chaired by Cabinet Office Minister Steve Barclay, not the prime minister.

"He is hiding from his own backbenchers instead of leading," Wes Streeting, Labour's spokesman on health issues, told Sky News. "And that kind of weakness instead of leadership should really concern the public, because I think people out there know that measures are necessary."

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Spidey nets 3rd best opening of all time with \$253 million

By LINDSEY BAHR AP Film Writer

Never underestimate your friendly neighborhood Spider-Man, even with a mutating virus afoot. Despite rising concerns over the omicron variant, "Spider-Man: No Way Home" not only shattered pandemic-era box office records; it became the third best opening of all time behind "Avengers: Endgame" (\$357.1 million) and "Avengers: Infinity War" (\$257.7 million).

The Sony and Marvel blockbuster grossed a stunning \$253 million in ticket sales from 4,325 North American locations, according to studio estimates on Sunday, also setting a record for the month of December. The web-slinger's success couldn't have come sooner for a movie business that has had a rollercoaster 2021 and could be headed for a difficult start to 2022 as the omicron variant of the coronavirus forces more and more event cancellations.

"This weekend's historic 'Spider-Man: No Way Home' results, from all over the world and in the face of many challenges, reaffirm the unmatched cultural impact that exclusive theatrical films can have when they are made and marketed with vision and resolve," said Tom Rothman, Sony Pictures Chairman and CEO, in a statement. "All of us at Sony Pictures are deeply grateful to the fabulous talent, both in front of and behind the camera, that produced such a landmark film."

In its five days playing in theaters internationally, it's amassed \$334.2 million in ticket sales, bringing its global total to \$587.2 million against a \$200 million production budget. The film has yet to open in

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markets like Thailand and Japan, and there is no release date set for China.

As the third standalone Spider-Man film in the Tom Holland era, "No Way Home" was always going to be an "event film" for fans. After several delays over the year Sony planted its launch in the pre-Christmas frame and as of late last week had anticipated a pandemic-best opening in the \$130 to \$150 million range. But it quickly became clear that "Spider-Man" was going to fly much higher. The film netted an incredible \$121.5 million in its first day — bumping "Star Wars: The Force Awakens" out of the No. 2 position.

Directed by Jon Watts, "No Way Home" picks up with Holland's Peter Parker grappling with the world finding out about his superhero identity, and features Zendaya, Marisa Tomei and Benedict Cumberbatch as Doctor Strange. The promise of spoiler reveals only added to the feverish hype that led to lines and sell-out showings across the country.

"For the target audience, this is absolute must-see, required viewing," said Paul Dergarabedian, the senior media analyst for Comscore. "There is no way fans were going to opt out because of omicron."

Many moviegoers also shelled out top dollar to see the film on the biggest screens possible. According to IMAX, an estimated \$36.2 million of the global total is from their large format screens.

"'Spider-Man: No Way Home' is an exclamation point on the comeback we've seen at the box office in 2021," said Rich Gelfond, CEO of IMAX. "With these historic results, IMAX continues to see blockbuster releases generate box office at or exceeding pre-pandemic levels."

And it's not just fans who have been giving the film good marks: Reviews have been overwhelmingly positive as well. It has a 94% "fresh" rating on Rotten Tomatoes.

Holland on Instagram thanked audiences for the record numbers.

"You made this possible. Your love and support means the world to me," Holland wrote on Saturday. "Thank you thank you thank you and if you haven't seen Spider-Man no way home yet... merry Christmas and you know what to do."

Before this weekend, Sony's "Venom: Let There Be Carnage" held the record for best opening of the pandemic with \$90.1 million.

But it wasn't all celebrations at the box office this weekend. In Spider-Man's wake were some high-profile casualties, including Guillermo del Toro's star-studded "Nightmare Alley," which grossed a mere \$3 million from 2,145 theaters. It opened in fifth place behind "Spider-Man," "Encanto" (\$6.5 million), "West Side Story" (\$3.4 million) and "Ghostbusters: Afterlife" (\$3.4 million).

"Nightmare Alley" had prestige and awards buzz behind it, with a cast including Bradley Cooper, Cate Blanchett and Rooney Mara, but a week after Steven Spielberg's "West Side Story" underwhelmed, it's a stark reminder of moviegoing realities during the pandemic and the power of the Marvel fanbase.

In the one-movie-takes-all environment, more often than not, that one movie has been a Marvel movie. Including "No Way Home," Marvel releases will make up five of the top six films of the year, including "Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings," "Venom: Let There Be Carnage," "Black Widow" and "Eternals."

And lest anyone was holding onto hopes that "West Side Story" would have a profitable "Greatest Showman" run after its lackluster start, the 20th Century Studios release fell 67% in its second weekend in theaters, bringing in only \$3.4 million.

But Spider-Man could also help the industry at large as it heads into 2022.

"It's almost hard to describe how important this debut is to an industry that was beset with one of the biggest challenges in its history in the pandemic," Dergarabedian said. "To have this resounding mandate in favor of the movie theater experience as expressed in these numbers that even just a few months ago were unthinkable makes this a watershed moment for movie theaters that I think will be discussed for decades."

Estimated ticket sales for Friday through Sunday at U.S. and Canadian theaters, according to Comscore. Final domestic figures will be released Monday.

1. "Spider-Man: No Way Home," \$253 million.
2. "Encanto," \$6.5 million.
3. "West Side Story," \$3.4 million.

4. "Ghostbusters: Afterlife," \$3.4 million.
5. "Nightmare Alley," \$3 million.
6. "House of Gucci," \$1.9 million.
7. "Eternals," \$1.2 million.
8. "Clifford The Big Red Dog," \$400,000.
9. "Resident Evil: Welcome to Raccoon City," \$280,000
10. "Venom: Let There Be Carnage," \$220,000

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Follow AP Film Writer Lindsey Bahr on Twitter: www.twitter.com/ladbahr

Finland's Christmas resorts in full swing but fear omicron

By JAMES BROOKS Associated Press

ROVANIEMI, Finland (AP) — Workers at Santa Claus Village, a holiday theme park on the edge of the Arctic Circle, chipped away at a frozen dome, using chisels to put the final touches on an ice restaurant-hotel filled with sculptures of snowmen, penguins and huskies.

The Christmas season is in full swing in Finnish Lapland, where venue operators happily report that visitors have returned in numbers approaching pre-pandemic levels. Tourists from elsewhere in Finland and abroad come to revel in the festive spirit at the sprawling theme park, take a reindeer or husky sleigh ride and if they're lucky, glimpse the Northern Lights.

How long the winter fun will last is uncertain as the omicron coronavirus variant leads to new travel restrictions, test requirements and quarantine measures.

"It is a worry, of course, because no one knows what's going to happen," Sanna Karkkainen, CEO of Visit Rovaniemi, the tourism board for the capital of Finnish Lapland. "There's always the worry that are we going to get cancellations."

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns and travel restrictions hit the northern Finnish region's travel industry hard. Before the pandemic, about 60% of Rovaniemi's more than half-million annual visitors came from abroad, mostly from elsewhere in Europe and some Asian countries.

According to Visit Rovaniemi, just over 11,000 people visited the city last December, an 82% drop from the same month a year earlier. Having survived a wretched 2020, many businesses see this winter as a "turning point," Karkkainen said.

"They could not suffer another year, another Christmas, without customers, that's for sure," she added.

Winter is the busiest tourist season in Finnish Lapland, and Air France and Eurowings recently added new direct flights to Rovaniemi from Paris and Dusseldorf, respectively. Local businesses say demand was high this month as visitors made their way north, relieved to have gotten away after last year's lockdowns.

"I think the last week, last few days, have been busier than ever," Tuomas Palmgren, co-owner of Rovaniemi taxi service Santa Line, said.

Newlyweds Stefanie and Mauro Sammut decided to honeymoon in Finnish Lapland, a complete shift in temperatures from their native Malta. The couple said they feared the trip might get canceled right up until they boarded their flight.

"Once the plane took off, we said, 'OK, we're fine,'" laughed Mauro Sammut, as young children slid past the couple on sleighs at Santa Claus Village and families posed for photos next to a temperature gauge that read minus 14 degrees Celsius (6.8 degrees Fahrenheit).

SantaPark, a Lapland theme park built in an old air raid shelter, decided to close its doors in March 2020, and with the pandemic continuing to keep visitors away, only reopened this winter. The park's chief experience officer, Ilkka Lankinen, recalled the mental distress of not knowing when they might return.

"We missed last Christmas season totally," he said, standing in the park's "Elf School," where children can take a crash course on becoming one of Santa's trusty helpers. "We tried to have the hotel open, but we also gave up on that one. So, basically, SantaPark has been closed for two years."

Sisters Laura and Anne Marie Spencer of Dublin, Ireland, originally booked their Lapland getaway for

December 2020. The pandemic forced them to push back the family trip by a year.

"It wasn't the only holiday that we had to rebook, but we were determined to get here," Anne Marie Spencer said.

There are currently no hugs with Father Christmas at Santa Claus Village — visitors are separated from Santa by a gingerbread cookie-shaped plexiglass screen. But returning tourists are a welcome sight for many, including a restaurant in central Rovaniemi that opened in August 2020.

"Most people thought we were completely crazy that we would even think about opening the restaurant in August when the situation was at its worst," Elisa Honkavuori, the co-owner of Gustav Kitchen and Bar, said.

The restaurant's chefs are now preparing their modern, Finnish-inspired dishes, such as rainbow trout and roasted potatoes with a caper butter sauce, to domestic and international guests. Yet Honkavuori worries the uncertainty and renewed restrictions that have arrived with the omicron variant will make people "feel that it's not nice to travel."

Restaurant patrons over age 16 have been required to show COVID certificates to enter Finland's eateries since Dec. 4. For now, individuals are eligible if they can prove they are fully vaccinated against the coronavirus, present a negative test result or show they recently recovered from COVID-19.

Starting Tuesday, however, Finland is reintroducing increased health screening on all travelers from outside the European Union or Europe's 26-nation Schengen Area, requiring all arriving passengers to show proof of a negative test taken within the previous 48 hours.

For Karkkainen and her tourist board colleagues, keeping up with new rules and what they might mean for business is a daily "puzzle," and one with no end in sight.

"You look at the latest updates" each day and wonder, "What's happening with the travelers?" she said. "It's been a really rough one and a half years, and the most surprising factor is that we don't know when it's really going to end."

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Troops find religious exemption for vaccines unattainable

By LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — More than 12,000 military service members refusing the COVID-19 vaccine are seeking religious exemptions, and so far they are having zero success.

That total lack of approvals is creating new tensions within the military, even as the vast majority of the armed forces have gotten vaccinated.

The services, urgently trying to keep the coronavirus pandemic in check by getting troops vaccinated, are now besieged with exemption requests they are unlikely to approve. Meanwhile, troops claiming religious reasons for avoiding the shots are perplexed because exemptions are theoretically available, yet seem impossible to obtain.

Caught in the middle are chaplains, who must balance the desire to offer compassionate care and guidance to personnel with the need to explain a complicated process that may well be futile. They also must assess requests from those who may be using religion as an excuse to avoid a vaccine that, while credited with preventing needless deaths, has become politically charged.

"So many of them come in thinking that I make the decision, and if they make this case, that it's a done deal," said Maj. A'Shellarien Lang, an Army chaplain for the National Guard. "I don't make the decision. And so when they find that out, it's a kind of game-changer in the sense that they know that the process has to continue."

According to the services, at least 30,000 service members are not yet vaccinated, but several thousand of those have gotten temporary or permanent medical or administrative exemptions approved. Of the remaining — which is likely 20,000 or more — thousands are working their way through the exemptions process, such as for religious reasons, or have flatly refused. That's about 1.5% of the roughly 1.3 million

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active duty troops.

Obtaining a religious exemption is rooted in a process that predates the pandemic and has been used for decisions such as whether troops on duty can wear head coverings or beards for religious reasons.

In addition to discussions with chaplains to determine whether they have a "sincerely held belief," troops must meet with commanders and medical personnel. The final decision is made higher up the chain of command and is also based on whether the person's vaccine exemption will pose a risk to mission accomplishment, unit cohesion, the health and safety of the force, and military readiness.

Even in the past, few troops have cleared those hurdles to get religious exemptions. And because the pandemic can directly affect the force's health and readiness, the bar is even higher, so military leaders aren't surprised by the lack of approved exemptions.

But for the troops and chaplains, it's been a bit overwhelming.

"It's just been a lot of interviews, a lot of memos," Lang said. "I find that my colleagues are stressed just because of the logistics of getting the memo done and having to make sure they're keeping up with the process. It's like rapid fire."

Air Force officials initially said religious exemption requests would be answered in 30 days. But they have gotten more than 4,700 requests — far more than the other military services, and the logistics of the lengthy review process has made it difficult to meet that timeline. The Navy has received about 2,700 religious exemption requests, the Marine Corps has 3,100 and the Army about 1,700. Some that were rejected have been appealed, but there is little data on that.

"We did not expect the surge of requests," said Air Force Col. Paul Sutter, chief chaplain for religious affairs at Space Force, which is included in the Air Force.

An Air Force reservist who requested a religious exemption said she's aware of none approved so far, and she is not optimistic. The reservist, who asked that her name be withheld for privacy reasons, said her chaplain was very straightforward, laying out the process and noting the lack of approvals.

Still, she said, she believes "God has a plan for my life."

Sutter and Col. Larry Bazer, deputy director of the National Guard's joint chaplain office, said they tell their chaplains to be impartial as they speak with service members and to follow the process.

"Meet the member where they are. Let them articulate who they are, how they believe and how they live out that faith," Sutter said he advises chaplains. "We're just looking for their articulation of their deeply held beliefs. You're looking for a consistency in how they adhere to those beliefs."

Lang, who has done more than 50 interviews, said a key question she asks is what service members plan to do if their request is denied — a possibility some don't expect.

She said some troops believe God doesn't want them vaccinated and are torn by what they see as a contradiction if God somehow doesn't ensure they get the exemption.

"If in their heart and their mind, they say this is God's will for my life, and if the answer is no, it's going to shatter that faith because there's no balance. There's no room for God to say no," she said. "When I create the space to say what if God says no, then that opens up another whole level of faith conversation."

The Air Force reservist who spoke on condition of anonymity said she was raised a Christian and is willing to retire if her request isn't granted, even though it would mean giving up her G.I. Bill tuition benefits that she would get if she stayed another year or more.

"I will have to forfeit that," said the mother of three children, including a newborn. Forgoing the tuition benefit, which she could transfer to her children, is worth it, she said. "I have no doubt God will provide for me."

The reservist, whose husband is in the Army and is vaccinated, was pregnant when the vaccine came out, and she was concerned about a possible reaction. Health officials have asserted it is safe for pregnant women, but in some cases the military has granted temporary exemptions to women. The reservist said her opposition is rooted in her faith, including concerns that some vaccines were tested on fetal cell lines developed over decades. The vaccines don't contain fetal material.

The Vatican has deemed it "morally acceptable" for Catholics to get the shot and other Christian faiths have done the same. But some religious leaders have offered exemption letter templates and voiced

support for vaccine avoidance.

The services, in many cases, provided chaplains with interview questions such as whether the service member's "pattern of conduct" is consistent, whether the member routinely complies with religious practices and whether the member participates in activities "associated with the belief."

Chaplains also take into account whether service members previously received religious accommodations. "I don't really dig into how long they've been in church and all of that kind of stuff because it's really about their current reality of what they really believe," Lang said. "And in that moment — let's suppose it's a political decision, but they wrap it in religiosity — that's still what they believe in that moment."

The chaplains said the interviews have had the side benefit of making troops more aware that religious personnel are available and that the meetings are triggering longer conversations about other issues.

"It's really been a bridge to just some greater ministry," Lang said.

Chaplains also are reaching out to each other for support. The past two years have been challenging for them as they worked with troops facing a wide range of struggles — from COVID-19 losses, job pressures, racial unrest and protests, and deployments.

"It really has been a major stress on our chaplain corps - just to be there as their chaplain," said Bazer, a rabbi. "Overall folks are good, but folks are tired. I think our faith gives us that extra strength to keep us going — it's that spiritual adrenaline push."

Omicron may sideline two leading drugs against COVID-19

By MATTHEW PERRONE AP Health Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — As strained U.S. hospitals brace for a new surge of COVID-19 cases caused by the fast-spreading omicron variant, doctors are warning of yet another challenge: the two standard drugs they've used to fight infections are unlikely to work against the new strain.

For more than a year antibody drugs from Regeneron and Eli Lilly have been the go-to treatments for early COVID-19, thanks to their ability to head off severe disease and keep patients out of the hospital.

But both drugmakers recently warned that laboratory testing suggests their therapies will be much less potent against omicron, which contains dozens of mutations that make it harder for antibodies to attack the virus. And while the companies say they can quickly develop new omicron-targeting antibodies, those aren't expected to launch for at least several months.

A third antibody from British drugmaker GlaxoSmithKline appears to be the best positioned to fight omicron. But Glaxo's drug is not widely available in the U.S., accounting for a small portion of the millions of doses purchased and distributed by the federal government. U.S. health officials are now rationing scarce drug supplies to states.

"I think there's going to be a shortage," said Dr. Jonathan Li, director of the Harvard/Brigham Virology Specialty Laboratory. "We're down to one FDA-authorized monoclonal antibody" with omicron because of the reduced effectiveness of Regeneron and Lilly's drugs.

The delta variant still accounts for more than 95% of estimated U.S. cases, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. But agency leaders say omicron is spreading faster than any past variant and will become the dominant strain nationwide within weeks.

Delivered by injection or infusion, antibodies are laboratory-made versions of human proteins that help the immune system fight off viruses and other infections.

Glaxo's drug, developed with Vir Biotechnology, was specifically formulated to bind to a part of the virus that is less likely to mutate, according to the companies. Early studies of laboratory-simulated omicron by the drugmakers and outside researchers show promising results.

Supply of the drug is "extremely limited, and additional doses of the product will not be available until the week of January 3rd," the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services said in a statement posted online.

After pausing distribution last month to conserve supply, HHS is now shipping 55,000 doses of the drug, called sotrovimab, to state health departments, with the doses arriving as early as Tuesday. An additional

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300,000 are expected in January.

The agency said it is distributing the drug to states based on their levels of infections and hospitalizations. HHS recommends states conserve the drug for the highest risk patients who are most likely to have omicron infections, either based on laboratory testing that can identify the variant or elevated levels of omicron spread in local communities, identified as 20% and higher.

High-risk patients include seniors and those with serious health problems, such as obesity, heart disease, diabetes and immune-system disorders.

Prior to the pause in shipments, Glaxo's drug accounted for about 10% of the 1.8 million antibody doses distributed to state health officials between mid-September and late November, according to federal figures.

London-based Glaxo says it is on track to produce 2 million doses by May, under contracts with the U.S., Canada, the U.K., Japan and several other countries. The company is working to add more manufacturing capacity next year.

The loss of two leading antibody therapies puts even more focus on a pair of highly anticipated antiviral pills that U.S. regulators are expected to soon authorize.

The drugs from Pfizer and Merck would be the first treatments Americans can take at home to head off severe disease. Pfizer's drug in particular has shown a powerful effect, curbing hospitalizations and deaths by nearly 90% in high-risk patients.

"If it's rolled out effectively this has a real big potential," to make up for antibody treatments, said Andrew Pekosz, a virologist at Johns Hopkins University. "That's an immediate place where these antivirals could minimize the impact of omicron."

Still, initial supplies of both drugs are expected to be limited.

The shrinking toolbox of treatments is a painful reminder that the virus still has the upper hand in the U.S., even with more than 200 million Americans fully vaccinated.

Scientists around the world are racing to understand omicron, including whether it causes more or less severe disease and how easily it evades protection from prior infection, vaccination, and antibody drugs.

"We're certainly going to see hospitalizations rise," said Dr. James Cutrell of the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center. "If we have a lack of antibodies that's certainly going to contribute to that many more patients needing to be in the hospital."

AP Medical Writer Laura Ungar contributed to this story.

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Islamic world pitches ways to aid desperately poor Afghans

By KATHY GANNON Associated Press

ISLAMABAD (AP) — Islamic countries scrambled on Sunday to find ways to help Afghanistan avert an imminent economic collapse they say would have a "horrendous" global impact.

The hastily called meeting of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in Islamabad ended with a promise to set up a fund to provide humanitarian aid through the Islamic Development Bank, which would provide a cover for countries to donate without dealing directly with the country's Taliban rulers.

In a press conference at the end of the summit, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi also described what he called good news from the United States, whose special representative on Afghanistan, Tom West, attended the summit.

He said West met with the Taliban delegation led by the interim foreign minister Amir Khan Muttaqi on the sidelines. Qureshi said West also said he was mandated to "engage" with the Taliban, that U.S. humanitarian aid to Afghanistan would not carry preconditions and there could be as much as \$1.2 billion available through the World Bank in money that could be released to Afghanistan.

There was no immediate response from the U.S. to Qureshi's statements.

There has been a growing call for the U.S. and other countries to release upward of \$10 billion in frozen

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Afghan assets. However, previously the U.S. has said at least some of that money is tied up in litigation involving the survivors and the families of victims of the 9/11 terrorist attacks carried out by al Qaida while being harbored in Afghanistan by the Taliban during their previous rule.

Sunday's summit brought together dozens of foreign ministers as well as the special representatives on Afghanistan of major powers, including China, the U.S. and Russia. It also included the U.N. undersecretary general on humanitarian affairs, and the president of the Islamic Development Bank Muhammad Sulaiman Al Jasser, who offered several concrete financing proposals. He said the IDB can manage trusts that could be used to move money into Afghanistan, jumpstart businesses and help salvage the deeply troubled economy.

At the outset of the summit, several participating nations called for a quick opening of the country's banking system and collectively, with the United Nations and international banking institutions, to provide assistance to Afghanistan. Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan directed his remarks to the U.S., urging Washington to drop preconditions for releasing desperately needed funds and restarting Afghanistan's banking systems.

Khan seemed to offer Taliban a pass on their limits on education for girls, urging the world to understand "cultural sensitivities" and saying human rights and women's rights meant different things in different countries. Still other speakers, including the OIC chairman Hussain Ibrahim Taha, emphasized the need for the protection of human rights, particularly those of women and girls.

"This gathering is about the Afghan people," said Qureshi, who warned that without immediate aid, Afghanistan was certain to collapse. The consequences would be "horrendous," he said, not just in Afghan lives lost to starvation and disease — but also what would most certainly create a mass exodus of Afghans. He predicted chaos would spread, allowing terrorism and the drug trade to flourish.

Martin Griffiths, the U.N. undersecretary for humanitarian affairs and emergency relief coordinator, warned that Afghanistan cannot survive on donations alone. He urged donor countries to show flexibility, allowing their money to pay salaries of public sector workers and support "basic services such as health, education, electricity, livelihoods, to allow the people of Afghanistan some chance to get through this winter and some encouragement to remain home with their families."

Beyond that, Griffiths said, "we need constructive engagement with the de facto authorities to clarify what we expect from each other."

Afghanistan's teetering economy, he added, requires decisive and compassionate action, or "I fear that this fall will pull down the entire population."

Griffiths said families simply do not have the cash for everyday purchases like food and fuel, as prices soar. The cost of fuel is up by around 40%, and most families spend 80% of their money just to buy food.

He rattled off a number of stark statistics.

"Universal poverty may reach 97% of the population of Afghanistan. That could be the next grim milestone," he warned. "Within a year, 30% of Afghanistan's GDP (gross domestic product) could be lost altogether, while male unemployment may double to 29%."

Next year the U.N. would be asking for \$4.5 billion in aid for Afghanistan — its single largest humanitarian aid request, he said.

In what appeared to be a message to the Taliban delegation, Qureshi and subsequent speakers, including Taha, emphasized the protection of human rights, particularly those of women and girls.

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.

At the summit's conclusion Qureshi said the OIC agreed to appoint a special representative on Afghanistan. The 20 foreign ministers and 10 deputy foreign ministers in attendance also agreed to establish a greater partnership with the United Nations to get help to desperate Afghans.

They participants also emphasized the critical need to open Afghanistan's banking facilities, which have

been largely closed since the Taliban takeover on Aug. 15. The Taliban has limited withdrawals from the country's banks to \$200 a month.

"We collectively feel that we have to unlock the financial and banking channels because the economy cannot function and people cannot be held without banking services," Qureshi said.

UK health boss: COVID-19 rules could tighten by Christmas

By DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Britain's health secretary has refused to rule out imposing tougher COVID-19 restrictions before Christmas amid the rapid rise of infections and continuing uncertainty about the omicron variant.

Health Secretary Sajid Javid said Sunday that the government was assessing the fast-moving situation and urged the public to be cautious as scientists examine the data. Much is still unknown about the highly transmissible new variant, even as hospitals brace for a surge in infections, he told the BBC.

"There are no guarantees in this pandemic, I don't think," Javid replied when asked about the potential for new restrictions. "At this point we just have to keep everything under review."

Prime Minister Boris Johnson last week reinstated rules requiring face masks in shops and ordered people to show proof of vaccination or a negative coronavirus test before entering nightclubs and other crowded venues. He has championed a program that relies on vaccines, an operation that delivered 830,000 booster shots on Saturday alone.

Vaccination sites are being asked to operate 12 hours a day, seven days a week with shopping centers, cathedrals and soccer stadiums into mass vaccination centers. Some sites are working 24 hours a day to make it easier for people who work shifts.

But the government's scientific advisers believe it won't be enough and have recommended more far-reaching restrictions to prevent U.K. hospitals from being overwhelmed, according to leaked minutes from a meeting of the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies seen by the BBC.

"We can't wait for hospitalizations to go through the roof before we do something about it, because by then it's too late," Professor David Spiegelhalter told Sky News.

The British Medical Association is warning that almost 50,000 doctors, nurses and other National Health Service staff in England could be off sick with Covid-19 by Christmas Day unless additional measures are introduced. Johnson's Conservative government needs further measures beyond just trying to vaccine-boost its way out of the situation, said Chaand Nagpaul, chair of the association's council.

"The reality is that MPs (lawmakers) have broken up for Christmas leaving the NHS brutally exposed to suffer the consequences of surging case rates and without the restrictions needed to bring these under control," Nagpaul said. "Doctors are not only incredibly worried about the potential impact this could have on hospitalizations, but also about what it would mean for patient care across the NHS if we have vast swathes of staff off sick."

The government on Sunday reported 82,886 more lab-confirmed COVID-19 cases in a day. With over 147,000 deaths, Britain already has Europe's highest COVID-19 death toll after Russia.

Nations across Europe are moving quickly to reimpose tougher measures to stem a new wave of COVID-19 infections spurred by the omicron variant. The Dutch government began a tough nationwide lockdown starting Sunday to rein in sharply rising infections and alarmed ministers in France, Germany, Austria and Cyprus have tightened travel restrictions.

Ireland imposed an 8 p.m. curfew on pubs and bars and limited attendance at indoor and outdoor events. Paris canceled its New Year's Eve fireworks.

London Mayor Sadiq Khan underscored concerns about the climbing COVID-19 cases and their potential to overwhelm the health care system by declaring a major incident Saturday, a move that allows local councils in Britain's capital to coordinate more closely with emergency services.

That came the same day as protesters marched in London to decry the new restrictions.

The World Health Organization reported Saturday that omicron has been detected in 89 countries. It says COVID-19 cases involving the variant are doubling every 1.5 to 3 days in places with community transmission.

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

Typhoon deaths in Philippines top 140; mayors plead for food

By JIM GOMEZ Associated Press

MANILA, Philippines (AP) — The death toll in the strongest typhoon to batter the Philippines this year has reached at least 146, and the governor of an island province especially hard-hit by Typhoon Rai said there may be even greater devastation that has yet to be reported.

Gov. Arthur Yap of Bohol province in the central Philippines said 72 people died there, 10 others were missing and 13 injured, and suggested the fatalities may still considerably increase because only 33 of 48 mayors were able to report back to him due to downed communications. Officials were trying to confirm a sizable number of deaths caused by landslides and extensive flooding elsewhere.

In statements posted on Facebook, Yap ordered mayors in his province of more than 1.2 million people to invoke their emergency powers to secure food packs for large numbers of people along with drinking water. Both have been urgently sought in several hard-hit towns.

After joining a military aerial survey of typhoon-ravaged towns, Yap said "it is very clear that the damage sustained by Bohol is great and all-encompassing."

He said the initial inspection did not cover four towns where the typhoon blew in as it rampaged through central island provinces on Thursday and Friday. The government said about 780,000 people were affected, including more than 300,000 residents who had to evacuate their homes.

At least 64 other typhoon deaths were reported by the disaster-response agency, the national police and local officials. Most were hit by falling trees and collapsed walls, drowned in flash floods or were buried in landslides. Officials on Dinagat Islands, one of the southeastern provinces first pounded by the typhoon, separately reported 10 deaths just from a few towns, bringing the overall fatalities so far to 146.

President Rodrigo Duterte flew to the region Saturday and promised 2 billion pesos (\$40 million) in aid. He met officials in Maasin City in Southern Leyte province where he was born. Duterte's family later relocated to the southern city of Davao, where he served as a longtime mayor before rising to the presidency.

"The moment I was born into this world, I told my mother, 'Let's not stay here because this place is really prone to typhoons,'" Duterte told officials.

At its strongest, the typhoon packed sustained winds of 195 kilometers (121 miles) per hour and gusts of up to 270 kph (168 mph), making it one of the most powerful in recent years to hit the disaster-prone archipelago, which lies between the Pacific Ocean and the South China Sea.

Floodwaters rose rapidly in Bohol's riverside town of Loboc, where residents were trapped on their roofs and in trees. They were rescued by the coast guard the following day. On Dinagat Islands, an official said the roofs of nearly all the houses, including emergency shelters, were either damaged or blown away entirely.

At least 227 cities and towns lost electricity, which has since been restored in only 21 areas, officials said, adding that three regional airports were damaged, including two that remain closed.

The deaths and widespread damage left by the typhoon ahead of Christmas in the largely Roman Catholic nation brought back memories of the catastrophe inflicted by another typhoon, Haiyan, one of the most powerful on record. It hit many of the central provinces that were pummeled last week, leaving more than 6,300 people dead in November 2013.

At the Vatican, Pope Francis expressed his closeness Sunday to the people of the Philippines, referencing the typhoon "that destroyed many homes."

About 20 storms and typhoons batter the Philippines each year. The archipelago also lies along the seismically active Pacific "Ring of Fire" region, making it one of the countries most susceptible to natural calamities.

From masks to book banning, conservatives take on educators

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By MEAD GRUVER Associated Press

CHEYENNE, Wyo. (AP) — A recent Wyoming school board meeting was again packed with opponents of mask mandates when things took an abrupt turn and a parent started reading aloud sexually explicit passages from a book available in school libraries.

"Parents like myself had no idea this stuff was here," the parent, Shannon Ashby, told trustees of Laramie County School District No. 1 in the capital city.

The push to remove objectionable books from school libraries is part of a renewed conservative interest in public education as a political issue since the start of the pandemic. Parents who first packed school board meetings to express their opposition to mask mandates and other COVID-19 measures have since broadened their focus to other issues they say clash with conservative values, including teachings about social justice, gender, race and history.

Such issues played a key role in last month's Virginia governor's election and are now poised to be in the Republican spotlight in the 2022 midterms.

"If you put pictures to the material that was read, our superintendent would be in jail for trafficking in kiddie porn," said Darin Smith, a local attorney and former Republican congressional candidate whose wife is on the school board. "I would never have known these extreme leftists that are controlling our school district had I not gone to voice my opposition to the masking."

The award-winning book Ashby wants pulled from Cheyenne high school and middle schools, "Monday's Not Coming," by Tiffany D. Jackson, is a novel about the mysterious disappearance of a Black teenager. Supporters say it contains important messages about topics such as poverty, child abuse and friendship, though it does include scenes such as a boy and a girl having sex on a teacher's desk.

Ashby also read allusions to sex acts in "Traffick," by Ellen Hopkins, a novel about teenagers victimized by sex trafficking.

Similar disputes over public school curricula and books arose recently in Virginia, where with help from former Vice President Mike Pence they became a major issue in Republican Glenn Youngkin's successful campaign for governor.

They've also been a political issue in the Carolinas and Texas while school officials in Kansas pulled almost 30 books from shelves after a complaint but soon returned them.

In Utah, the state chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union opened an investigation in November after a suburban Salt Lake City district removed several books including "The Bluest Eye," by Toni Morrison, pending investigation into a parent complaint. Other books that have been the subject of complaints in the city's schools include titles with LGBTQ characters and plot lines.

"There is a wave of well-funded, well-organized attacks in our schools and looking to remove library books from the shelves," Utah Education Association President Heidi Matthews said.

Library organizations are pushing back, pointing out that many of the books in question depict struggles of minorities. Efforts to remove them send a message to minority youth that their views don't matter, said Deborah Caldwell Stone, director of the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom.

"It's a terrible message to send to young people," Stone said. "For me, it's just astonishing that so many groups that use 'liberty' in their names, that claim that they're all for freedom and the individual right to exercise freedom, resort so quickly to use censorship."

Ashby belongs to Moms for Liberty, a conservative group that says it challenges "short-sighted and destructive" policies in public schools.

Wyoming's top education official, however, questioned whether the book disputes are a fundamentally conservative cause.

"Labeling this as a 'conservative' issue is a disservice to parents and their children. We should embrace parents wanting to engage with their children's education, not label them," Superintendent of Public Instruction Jillian Balow, a Republican, said in a statement Thursday.

In September, Balow joined Wyoming's Republican legislative leaders in supporting proposed state legislation to counter the teaching of "critical race theory," which has become a catch-all term for efforts to teach that systemic racism remains a persistent problem in the U.S. Opponents of those efforts say

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they are divisive and counterproductive.

Balow noted that disputes over books aren't new. Since the 1970s, for example, several books by children's and young adult author Judy Blume have been banned from schools and libraries for everything from sexuality to endings people didn't like. Mark Twain's "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" is another frequent target due to racist language.

Ashby said she first heard about the books in the Cheyenne district after tuning in to conservative podcasts. She then checked an online school library book database to see which books mentioned in the podcasts were in Cheyenne.

"I figured living in Cheyenne, Wyoming, we would be safe," said Ashby, who removed her three children from the district at the start of the school year because of the mask mandate.

Cheyenne school officials haven't begun reviewing the books Ashby opposes because nobody has filed a formal complaint, Superintendent Margaret Crespo said.

Crespo said book opponents at school board meetings represent a small fraction of the community and not those who've written or spoken to school officials in support, though the district has begun adjusting its policies for books, including how they are purchased and checked out.

Opponents of the books gained one school board member's sympathy after district officials deleted Ashby's reading of the sexual material from an online video out of concern YouTube could suspend the district's account.

"If we have books in our system that are not appropriate to be read at our school board meeting, then maybe they're not appropriate to be read in our school district," Trustee Christy Klaassen said to applause and cheers at a school board meeting Dec. 6.

The district has an opt out policy for parents who don't want their children to check out books with mature content but should consider an "opt in" policy instead, said Klaassen, whose husband was the Donald Trump-appointed U.S. attorney for Wyoming until January.

On the night Ashby read to the school board, just one person spoke in favor of the mask mandate or keeping the books.

"Parents should read what their kids are reading, and if they don't approve it, don't let them read it. That doesn't mean that they have the right to make that decision for every other family," Dr. Renee Hinkle, a local obstetrician, said over heckling.

Mendee Cotton, a grandparent of seven local students, told the Cheyenne school board that what was in the books was "pornography, pedophilia" and parents wouldn't stop until they were gone.

"The sleeping giant is awake. You affected our kids and now we are angry," she said. "Make no mistake, this is a war."

Associated Press writer Lindsay Whitehurst in Salt Lake City contributed to this report.

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Thousands in Brussels protest renewed COVID-19 restrictions

BRUSSELS (AP) — Thousands of peaceful protesters demonstrated in Brussels on Sunday for a third time against reinforced COVID-19 restrictions imposed by the Belgian government to counter a spike in infections as the omicron variant sweeps across Europe.

The marchers — some with placards reading "free zone," "I've had my fair dose" and "enough is enough" — came to protest the government's strong advice to get vaccinated. They also included Belgian health care workers who will have a three-month window in which to get vaccinated against the virus beginning Jan. 1 or risk losing their jobs.

A strong police presence and widespread preventive controls were deployed for the march, given how previous protests had descended into violence. But only 13 arrests were made for "rebellion and possession of prohibited articles," according to police spokesperson Ilse Van de Keere.

Also Sunday, the Brussels-based European Commission agreed with Pfizer-BioNTech to accelerate the delivery of vaccines starting in a few weeks. The pharmaceutical giant will deliver an additional 20 million vaccine doses from January to March to the European Union's 27 nations.

The Belgian protest comes one day after similar protests in other European capitals including Paris and London. Nations across Europe are reimposing tougher measures to stem a new wave of COVID-19 infections spurred by the highly transmissible omicron variant, with the Netherlands leading the way by imposing a nationwide lockdown.

The World Health Organization reported this weekend that the omicron variant has been detected in 89 countries, and variant cases are doubling every 1.5 to 3 days in places with community transmission.

In a Brussels protest last month, several hundred people started pelting police, smashing cars and setting garbage bins ablaze. Police responded with tear gas and water cannons.

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

Nebraska's quandary: Can it force more citizens to work?

By GRANT SCHULTE Associated Press

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — Even in normal times Nebraska has one of the lowest unemployment rates in the nation, with fewer than two million people and plenty of jobs to go around. But with some workers slow to return to work after COVID-19 shutdowns, the state has hit new depths, recording the country's lowest-ever state unemployment rate of 1.8% in November.

Now Gov. Pete Ricketts, who frequently expounds on the value of work, is confronting an intriguing question: Can a governor force citizens to work, even if they apparently aren't eager or able to do so?

Ricketts is certainly trying every option imaginable to get Nebraskans into jobs, including requiring people to confer with job coaches before seeking unemployment benefits.

"There's going to be a lot of different things we're going to have to do to reach each individual and, if they're not working for whatever reason, get them back into the workforce," Ricketts said recently.

Unemployment rates are low in many places, and as the national rate fell to 4.2%, officials across the country are struggling to convince people who have stopped looking for work to seek jobs.

A full work force is needed to keep businesses functioning and support local economies, but it's hard to overstate the difficulty of uprooting people who are caring for family members, exploring other life options or who just want to take a break.

Ricketts is determined to try with policies that make it more trouble to stay home.

"Jobs help create great financial independence for Nebraskans and their families, giving them the dignity to achieve their dreams," said the two-term Republican governor, who is part of the Ricketts family, whose estimated \$4.5 billion in wealth originated with the creation of the online brokerage Ameritrade.

Ricketts' first move was to require people seeking unemployment benefits to meet with a job coach, discuss specific employment goals and enroll in an "individualized reemployment plan." The state added tougher requirements for maintaining benefits and for contacting employers to apply for openings.

Nebraska also was one of the first to end supplemental federal assistance for workers hit by the pandemic.

Nebraska has about 49,000 job openings listed on a state website and 19,000 working-age residents who are not working. About 4,300 people are receiving unemployment benefits.

Among the unemployed is Sonja Redding, an Omaha mother whose daughter and son have autism and methylmalonic acidemia, a rare autoimmune disease that makes them exceptionally vulnerable to viruses.

Redding previously worked as a reseller and ran her own booth at a flea market but stopped after the pandemic hit. She has survived on federal stimulus money, unemployment, Social Security income and her own savings, but lately has reduced her spending "to a bare minimum" so she can stay home with her children.

"I would love to get back to work," she said. "I'm a normal parent and would like to have time away from my kids sometimes, but this is what we've got to do right now. It's definitely draining."

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Redding said employers she's talked to want her to come into the office.

Other reasons some people aren't working include concerns about being infected with the coronavirus, said Dave Swenson, a economics professor at Iowa State University. Burnout is another factor, particularly among health care workers and teachers.

Swenson questions the effectiveness of Ricketts' efforts because most people without jobs aren't getting jobless aid, he said.

Still, there is no question that Nebraska businesses are hurting for workers.

"It's their No. 1 challenge, their No. 2 challenge and their No. 3 challenge," said Bryan Slone, president of the Nebraska Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

In a chamber survey, more than 90% of chamber members identified worker shortages as their biggest concern.

In Lincoln, Nebraska's second-largest city, Kawasaki Motors Manufacturing has been unable to meet customer demand for its jet skis, ATVs, subway rail cars and aircraft parts.

"I would hire 150 people right now if I could," said Bryan Seck, the company's chief talent management strategist.

Lincoln's unemployment rate before the pandemic was 3.8%, but now it's closer to 1.3%. Kawasaki has begun offering more consistent hours, an \$18.10 starting hourly wage and a tuition reimbursement program.

Mitch Tempus, the owner of two Fernando's Cafe & Cantina restaurants in the Omaha area, said he's been trying unsuccessfully to lure back some of the servers and bussers he laid off last year, even offering raises that increased his labor costs by more than 20% and brought average wages up to \$13 or \$14 an hour.

And with new hires, "It's even hard retaining them," he said. "Sometimes people will work for two or three days and then we never see them again."

Pat Keenan, who manages three chain hotels in North Platte, Nebraska, said he's given up plans to open a restaurant near one hotel because "the chances of us getting it staffed are almost zero."

He added, "I would call 2021 the year of the hourly employee," he said. "They have more power than they've had and more money than they've ever had."

Keenan said it's time for the federal government to come up with an immigration reform plan that would allow more immigrants to work legally in the United States.

"I think we're back at the stage where we need an influx of hard-working people again," Keenan said. "I hate to say it, but it feels like a lot of existing Americans feel a little entitled and have lost their work ethic."

Follow Grant Schulte on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/GrantSchulte>

Mass anti-coup protests in Sudan mark uprising anniversary

By SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — Sudanese took to the streets in the capital of Khartoum and elsewhere across the country for mass protests Sunday against an October military takeover and a subsequent deal that reinstated Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok but sidelined the movement.

The demonstrations mark the third anniversary of the uprising that eventually forced the military removal of longtime autocrat Omar al-Bashir and his Islamist government in April 2019.

Sudan then followed a fragile path toward democracy and ruled by a joint military-civilian government. The October 25 coup has rattled the transition and led to relentless street protests.

Video footage circulated online purported to show tens of thousands protesters marching in the streets of Khartoum and its twin city of Omdurman on Sunday. Protesters were seen waving the Sudanese flag and white ones with printed images of those killed in the uprising and ensuing protests.

Ahead of the demonstrations, Sudan's authorities tightened security across the capital, barricading government and military buildings to prevent protesters from reaching the military's headquarters and

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the presidential palace. They also blocked major roads and bridges linking Khartoum and Omdurman across the Nile River.

Security forces used tear gas to disperse protesters headed toward the palace on the bank of the Blue Nile in the heart of Khartoum, according to activist Nazim Sirag. The Sudan Doctors Committee said some protesters were injured, but didn't provide a tally.

Activists described chaotic scenes, with many protesters rushing to side streets from the tear gas. Later, footage showed protesters at one of the palace's gates chanting: "The people want the downfall of the regime" — a slogan heard in the Arab Spring uprisings that began in late 2010. Those movements forced the removal of leaders in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen.

The Sudanese Professionals' Association, which spearheaded the uprising against al-Bashir, called on protesters to gather outside the palace and block roads with make-shift barricades.

There were also protests in elsewhere in the country, such as the coastal city of Port Sudan and the northern city of Atbara, the birthplace of the uprising against al-Bashir.

The protests were called by the pro-democracy movement that led the uprising against al-Bashir and stuck a power-sharing deal with the generals in the months that followed his ouster.

Relations between the generals and the civilians in the transitional government were shaky and capped by the military's Oct. 25 takeover that removed Hamdok's government.

Hamdok was reinstated last month amid international pressure in a deal that calls for an independent technocratic Cabinet under military oversight led by him. The agreement included the release of government officials and politicians detained since the coup.

Talks are underway to agree on what Gen. Abdel-Fattah Burhan, head of the ruling Sovereign Council, described as a "new political charter" focused on establishing a broader consensus among all political forces and movements.

Addressing Sudanese late Saturday ahead of the protests, Hamdok said he stuck the Nov. 21 deal with the military mainly to prevent bloodshed. He warned that the country could slide further into chaos amid uphill economic and security challenges.

"Today, we are facing a retreat in the path of our revolution that threatens the country's security and integrity," Hamdok said, adding that the agreement was meant to preserve achievements his government made in the past two years, and to "protect our nation from sliding to a new international isolation."

"The deal, in my view, is the most effective and inexpensive means to return to the course of civic and democratic transition," he said.

Hamdok urged political parties and movements to agree on a "national charter" to complete the democratic transition and achieve peace with rebel groups.

The pro-democracy movement has meanwhile insisted that power be handed over to a civilian government to lead the transition. Their relentless protests follow the slogan: "No negotiations, no compromise, no power-sharing" with the military.

The list of demands also includes restructuring the military and other security agencies under civilian oversight and disbanding militias. One is the Rapid Support Forces, a paramilitary force that grew out of janjaweed militias and is accused of atrocities during the Darfur conflict and most recently against pro-democracy protesters.

Sunday's protests have "unified all revolutionary forces behind a single demand: handing over power to civilians," said Mohammed Yousef al-Mustafa, a spokesman for the Sudanese Professionals' Association.

"Prime Minister Hamdok must declare a clear position and choose whether to join the people or continue siding with the generals," he told The Associated Press.

The continued protests since the coup have increased pressure on the military and Hamdok, who has yet to announce his Cabinet.

Security forces used violence, including firing live ammunition at protesters, in the past round of demonstrations, according to activists. At least 45 people were killed and hundreds wounded in protests triggered by the coup, according to a tally by a Sudanese medical group.

Restaurants anxious as omicron, high food costs take toll

By DEE-ANN DURBIN, MAE ANDERSON and SYLVIA HUI Associated Press

DETROIT (AP) — While restaurants in the U.S. and United Kingdom are open without restrictions and often bustling, they are entering their second winter of the coronavirus pandemic anxious about what's ahead: They're squeezed by labor shortages and skyrocketing food costs and the omicron variant is looming.

"I'm extremely worried. I've never felt like we were out of the woods," said Caroline Glover, chef and owner of the restaurant Annette in the Denver suburb of Aurora.

The rapid spread of omicron already is pummeling the industry in Britain and elsewhere, with restaurants, hotels and pubs reporting cancellations at the busiest and most lucrative time of year. Businesses urged the U.K. government to offer relief after officials warned people to think carefully about socializing. Scotland and Wales have pledged millions of pounds for businesses, adding pressure for Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government to do the same in England.

"It's pretty devastating. For private hires, bigger tables of say eight to 16 people, those have pretty much disappeared. These are the bread and butter for restaurants at Christmastime," said Jeff Galvin, co-owner of Galvin Restaurants, a group of five upmarket venues in London.

Many businesses said hundreds of festive corporate lunch bookings vanished almost overnight as infections began to soar and Johnson announced tighter restrictions, including mandatory mask-wearing in most indoor spaces, though restaurants are open as usual.

Glover in Colorado worries about renewed restrictions if infections climb. For now, business has returned, with her dining room back to full capacity — up from a cap of 50% last year — and four greenhouses outside booked far in advance.

Similarly, diners have returned and business is strong for Amy Brandwein, who owns the Italian restaurant Centolina and a small cafe, Piccolina, in Washington. After her restaurants survived lockdowns with takeout and grocery offerings, "I could safely say we're back to 2019 levels," she said.

But staffing remains a challenge. In a recent survey of 3,000 U.S. restaurant operators, 77% said they didn't have enough workers to meet demand, according to the National Restaurant Association, an industry trade group.

Many restaurant workers started new careers or went back to school. Jada Sartor of Grand Rapids, Michigan, saw her wages rise from \$10 per hour to \$16 per hour this year as restaurants grew more desperate for workers, but she recently quit her serving job because she couldn't find affordable child care.

"The cost of living is just so high you can't afford to really live," she said.

Kristin Jonna, owner of restaurant and wine bar Vinology in Ann Arbor, Michigan, said she raised wages nearly 40% to attract and retain her staff of 35. It was a change that needed to happen in the service industry, she said. But she can't hike menu prices enough to compensate.

"Everyone knows that beef is more expensive, but high-end, highly skilled labor is expensive, too," Jonna said. "That is the very tricky part of our business right now."

Jonna said the restaurant is humming despite high COVID-19 caseloads in Michigan. She has fewer large events scheduled, but the customers who are coming in are spending more.

U.S. sales at restaurants and bars hit an estimated \$73.7 billion in November, up 37% from the same month last year, according to preliminary data from the U.S. Census Bureau. But that was partly due to higher menu prices as restaurants try to account for inflation.

Sara Lund, owner of Bodega and The Rest, a bar and restaurant in Salt Lake City, Utah, said her ingredient costs rose between 15% and 40% this year.

"The margins on food are never going to be astronomical, even in good times," she said. "But paying 40% more for protein? I can't pass that along to the customer."

Diners know restaurants are struggling, and many say they have resumed eating out to help their favorite local spots. Liz Cooper of Needham, Massachusetts, said she's comfortable dining indoors with her

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family of five, all of whom are vaccinated except for her 4-year-old daughter.

"If you like a restaurant and a small business you should get out there and support them," Cooper said. "They might have to close, and then you'll be heartbroken that you can't get your favorite chicken parm or cannoli."

Steve Geffen, who owns four Chicago-area restaurants, including Once Upon a Grill, said he removed 30% of the tables from his restaurants to ensure customers felt comfortable dining inside. So far, it's working.

"They don't mind waiting longer, knowing they're not sitting on top of everybody else," he said.

But Jeanne Busch in Forest Park, Illinois, is sticking with occasional takeout.

"I am definitely not comfortable maskless indoors in a crowd," Busch said. "As we head into winter and omicron continues its rampage, we expect mostly to be eating at home."

In Britain, omicron has already devastated restaurants and pubs. Patrick Dardis, who heads the Young's chain of some 220 pubs, said he hoped officials would come up with a financial relief plan soon. About 30% of the chain's bookings canceled last week.

"There are thousands of businesses — not just pubs — that could collapse in January if the current situation isn't partnered with proper financial support," he said.

UKHospitality, an industry trade group, urged tax relief, saying concerns about omicron have wiped out 2 billion pounds (\$2.6 billion) in sales this month.

Restaurants also are clamoring for government support in the U.S., where the Restaurant Revitalization Fund ran dry earlier this year after dispersing \$28.6 billion to 100,000 applicants.

Sean Kennedy, executive vice president for public policy at the National Restaurant Association, said the industry needs at least \$40 billion to fund the 200,000 applicants who didn't receive grants. So far, Congress hasn't taken action.

It's harder for restaurants to explain what's happening now that their dining rooms are full and they're not on lockdown, Kennedy said.

"They think that we're fully packed and crushing it, but the answer is, we are barely getting by," he said.

Lindsay Mescher, who opened the Greenhouse Cafe in Lebanon, Ohio, in 2019, is frustrated that she never received a promised government grant. She was approved in May, but demand was so high the fund was exhausted before she received any money.

She took out loans to keep her staff of eight employed while offering only carryout for the first 16 months of the pandemic. The cafe reopened to diners this year and had a busy summer and fall, but Mescher is still struggling. She used to pay \$165.77 for a case of 400 takeout salad bowls, for example; now they cost \$246.75.

"The funds would have guaranteed survival for us," Mescher said. "It's extremely unfair that some restaurants got relief and some didn't."

Anderson reported from New York and Hui from London.

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Across US, houses of worship struggle to rebuild attendance

By DAVID CRARY AP National Writer

When Westminster United Methodist Church in Houston resumed in-person services late last year, after a seven-month halt due to COVID-19, there were Sundays when only three worshippers showed up, according to the pastor, Meredith Mills.

Since then, attendance has inched back up, but it's still only about half the pre-pandemic turnout of 160 or 170, Mills estimates.

"It's frustrating," she said. "People just seem to want to leave home less these days."

Some houses of worship are faring better than Mills' church, some worse. Polls by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research shows how dramatically church attendance fell during the worst

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of the pandemic last year, even as many say they are now returning to regular service attendance.

Among mainline Protestants, just 1% said in a May 2020 poll that they were attending in-person services at least once a week. In the new poll, 14% say they're doing so now, compared to 16% who say they did in 2019.

Among evangelical Protestants, 37% now say they are attending services in person at least weekly, while 42% said they did that in 2019. In the May 2020 poll, just 11% said they were attending services in person that often.

Among Catholics, 26% attend in person at least weekly now, compared with 30% in 2019. In the 2020 poll, conducted as many bishops temporarily waived the obligation for weekly Mass attendance, just 5% were worshipping in person at least weekly.

At St. Ambrose Catholic Parish in Brunswick, Ohio, the six services each weekend drew a total of about 3,800 worshippers before the pandemic, according to the pastor, Bob Stec. Current weekend attendance is about 2,800, Stec says, with 1,600 or more households joining online worship.

Elsewhere, churches large and small have taken hits in attendance.

John Elkins, teaching pastor at Sovereign Grace Fellowship in Brazoria, Texas, says 25 to 30 people have attended services recently, down from around 50 before the pandemic.

"For some, I was not political enough," he said via email. "Some wanted more activities, some just stopped going to church."

Sovereign Grace, a Southern Baptist church, had never offered online worship before the pandemic. When in-person worship was halted for a month in 2020, leaving online worship as the only option, Elkins said he did more crisis counseling for congregation members than ever before.

At the much larger First Church of God in Columbus, Ohio, there was a near-total halt to in-person worship between March 2020 and September of this year. On two Sundays in September 2020, worshippers were invited back to the church to test the feasibility of in-person services.

"But it was obvious they were still uncomfortable -- they came dressed like they were working at Chernobyl," said the senior pastor, Bishop Timothy Clarke, evoking hazmat suits appropriate for confronting a nuclear disaster.

Pre-pandemic, the predominantly African American church held three services each weekend, including one on Saturday evenings, with average total attendance of 2,500. Now there's a single service on Sunday, and only 500 worshippers -- with masks and proof of vaccination -- are allowed into a sanctuary that can seat more than 1,500.

The return to in-person worship "gives us a sense of connection and community," Clarke said. "But you also have safety."

At All Saints' Episcopal Church in the New York City borough of Brooklyn, average Sunday attendance dropped from about 140 pre-pandemic to as low as 30 before climbing back, reaching 120 earlier this month. The Rev. Steven Paulikas credits a mandatory mask policy.

"Mask wearing puts people at ease about their health and allows them to do what people come to church to do -- worship God," he said.

Attendance is down sharply from pre-pandemic levels at St. Barnabas Lutheran Church in Cary, Illinois, which halted in-person, indoor worship for more than six months in 2020. Instead it held drive-in services in the parking lot.

Before the pandemic, about 115 people would attend one of two services offered on Sundays, said the pastor, Sarah Wilson. Now there's one service, and attendance is down by more than half.

"Some families are still nervous about being in a room with others, even though most people attending are vaccinated and we require masks," she said. "Other people have re-ordered their priorities and worship isn't one of them."

Friendswood United Methodist Church, in the Houston suburbs, has endured not only COVID-19 disruptions but also flooding during a winter storm last February that rendered the sanctuary unusable. It just reopened for services this month, said the pastor, Jim Bass.

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Pre-pandemic, Friendswoods' Sunday services would draw about 900 worshippers; Bass was pleased that about 650 gathered when the sanctuary reopened for high-energy, music-filled services on Dec. 5.

However, he said average attendance has been only half of that during most of the pandemic, creating a \$400,000 shortfall in expected giving.

Like many houses of worship, Friendswood offered online services as an alternative to in-person attendance. He considers them a mixed blessing -- a plus for elderly congregation members worried about their health, but a disincentive for others who are increasingly disconnected from the church.

"They've become spectators," Bass said.

At Temple Beth El in Charlotte, North Carolina, Rabbi Asher Knight was elated that recent Hannukah celebrations drew about 300 people in person. Overall, attendance now is roughly half of pre-pandemic levels, but an improvement over periods earlier this year when only a handful of worshippers appeared.

"It was demoralizing and painful to lead worship with virtually no one present," he said. "But in October and November, people got the booster and their children got vaccinated and they slowly started coming back."

In September, amid a surge in COVID cases, Temple Judea in Coral Gables, Florida, observed the Jewish High Holy Days with no in-person services. So the sanctuary wouldn't look so empty for online services, Rabbi Judith Siegal and her staff filled it with cardboard cutouts of congregation members, including children and pets.

In-person worship has now resumed, and the range of weekly attendance -- 75 to 125 people -- is close to pre-pandemic levels.

"We're still wearing masks, and the seating is still spread out," Siegal said. "But our members love it."

Among Christians, the option of worshipping online has been embraced by many evangelical Protestants, according to the AP-NORC poll. About 3 in 10 have livestreamed services at least weekly in recent months, compared with about 1 in 10 Catholics or mainline Protestants.

Three-quarters of evangelical Protestants say they pray privately at least weekly, compared with roughly half of mainline Protestants and Catholics, the poll found.

Roughly a quarter of evangelical Protestants say they've recently talked by phone or video conference with a religious or spiritual leader at least a few times a month, compared with about 1 in 10 mainline Protestants and Catholics.

Some faith leaders, such as Meredith Mills, see some positives, such as more energy in the church, even with fewer worshippers.

"The ones showing up right now are the people who really want to be there," she said. "There's a lot of joy in the room Sunday mornings. It's one of the reasons that, despite everything, I still love my job."

The AP-NORC poll of 1,083 adults was conducted Oct. 21-25 using a sample designed to be representative of U.S. population. The margin of sampling error for all respondents is plus or minus 4 percentage points.

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Osaka arson suspect identified, buildings to be checked

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Japanese police on Sunday identified a 61-year-old man as a prime suspect behind a fire that engulfed a mental health clinic in an eight-story building where he was a patient, killing 24 people who were trapped inside.

The government also announced plans to inspect tens of thousands of similar buildings nationwide. Authorities believe the massive death toll at the downtown Osaka building on Friday was largely because the fire made its only emergency stairway unusable.

Osaka police, which are investigating the case as arson and murder, identified the man as Morio Tani-

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moto. He is being treated in serious condition after he was rescued from the fire, police said. He has not been formally arrested or charged.

After verifying security cameras and searching his home, police said they suspect Tanimoto was responsible for setting fire to the clinic where patients received consultations and treatment for psychiatric conditions, an official at the prefectural police investigation department told The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the media.

Security camera footage broadcast by NHK television showed what it said was the suspect heading to the clinic Friday morning, carrying a backpack and riding a bicycle that had bags in a front basket and something bulky tied to its rear. The man in the footage wore a surgical mask and a baseball cap that obscured his face.

Kyodo News said Tanimoto was a metal worker. His former employer at a factory where he worked in 2002-2010 described him as diligent and skilled. He quit without saying what his plans were, he said. Tanimoto trained at his father's sheet metal factory in Osaka after finishing high school, but left after his brother took over the business and subsequently changed jobs numerous times, Kyodo said.

Some of his neighbors interviewed by local media described him as a gray-haired man who rode a bicycle and hardly spoke.

"Nishi Umeda Clinic for the Mind and Body" was on the fourth floor of an eight-story building in Osaka's bustling business district of Kitashinchi, and was known for its support for mental health at places of employment.

Police searched Tanimoto's house on Saturday and found the a patient card for the clinic.

Authorities are investigating how the smoke filled the floor so quickly that it left victims trapped. The fire that burned just 25 square meters (270 square feet) of the floor near the reception was mostly extinguished within 30 minutes.

On Sunday, Internal Affairs and Communications Minister Yasushi Kaneko, who is also in charge of fire and disaster management, said he had ordered a nationwide inspection of about 30,000 commercial buildings with three or more floors but only one stairway.

Kaneko said many victims were unable to escape and died because the Osaka building's only stairway was not accessible due to the fire and they became lost while seeking a way out. He said the ministry will set up a panel of experts to discuss safety measures.

Police quoted witnesses who saw a man walking into the clinic with a paper bag, which he put on the floor right next to a heater by the reception desk, and then kicked it. Liquid poured out, caught fire and the area erupted in flames and smoke.

A security camera at the clinic captured the scene, in which the man is seen standing at the entrance as if blocking the way, NHK television said.

Witnesses and the investigation suggested that the victims gasped for air and struggled to find their way out of the clinic. Most were found to have collapsed while headed to the other end of the clinic, only to find there was no alternative exit.

The clinic, which also lacked an external stairway, had several small rooms for consultations and workshops along just one hallway, with the main meeting room on the far end of the floor. There were no records of prior violations of fire prevention codes at the building, officials said.

Two visitors who witnessed the beginning of the fire at the reception desk were able to run out.

Firefighters initially found 27 people in a state of cardiac arrest, including three who were resuscitated, officials said. A fourth survivor was brought down by an aerial ladder from a window on the sixth floor with a slight injury.

Some of the clinic's clients who spoke to Japanese media said it was popular and 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.

Over the weekend, Osaka residents brought flowers, bottled water and canned drinks as offerings to the spirits of the departed outside the building.

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The fire was a shocking reminder of the 2019 attack at the Kyoto Animation studio, in which an attacker stormed in and set the building 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.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Monday, Dec. 20, the 354th day of 2021. There are 11 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 20, 1987, more than 4,300 people were killed when the Dona Paz (DOHN'-yuh pahz), a Philippine passenger ship, collided with the tanker Vector off Mindoro island.

On this date:

In 1803, the Louisiana Purchase was completed as ownership of the territory was formally transferred from France to the United States.

In 1860, South Carolina became the first state to secede from the Union as all 169 delegates to a special convention in Charleston voted in favor of separation.

In 1864, Confederate forces evacuated Savannah, Georgia, as Union Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman nearly completed his "March to the Sea."

In 1924, Adolf Hitler was released from prison after serving nine months for his role in the Beer Hall Putsch.

In 1946, the Frank Capra film "It's A Wonderful Life," starring James Stewart and Donna Reed, had a preview showing for charity in New York, a day before its official world premiere.

In 1963, the Berlin Wall was opened for the first time to West Berliners, who were allowed one-day visits to relatives in the Eastern sector for the holidays.

In 1989, the United States launched Operation Just Cause, sending troops into Panama to topple the government of Gen. Manuel Noriega.

In 1995, an American Airlines Boeing 757 en route to Cali, Colombia, slammed into a mountain, killing all but four of the 163 people aboard. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, NATO began its peacekeeping mission, taking over from the United Nations.

In 1999, the Vermont Supreme Court ruled that homosexual couples were entitled to the same benefits and protections as wedded heterosexual couples.

In 2002, Trent Lott resigned as Senate Republican leader two weeks after igniting a political firestorm with racially charged remarks.

In 2005, a federal judge ruled that "intelligent design" could not be mentioned in biology classes in a Pennsylvania public school district, delivering a stinging attack on the Dover Area School Board.

In 2017, Cardinal Bernard Law, the disgraced former archbishop of Boston, died in Rome at the age of 86; his failure to stop child molesters in the priesthood had triggered a crisis in American Catholicism.

Ten years ago: Lori Berenson, an American paroled after 15 years behind bars in Peru for aiding leftist guerrillas, arrived at Newark Liberty International Airport for her first visit home since her arrest in 1995. (After a 17-day visit, Berenson returned to Peru to serve out the rest of her parole; she was expelled from Peru on Dec. 2, 2015 and returned to the U.S.)

Five years ago: President Barack Obama designated the bulk of U.S.-owned waters in the Arctic Ocean and certain areas in the Atlantic Ocean as indefinitely off limits to future oil and gas leasing. A deadly chain-reaction explosion ripped through Mexico's best-known fireworks market on the northern outskirts of the capital, killing at least 36 people. Two-time Wimbledon champion Petra Kvitova was injured in her playing hand by a knife-wielding attacker at her Czech Republic home and underwent surgery. (The attacker was sentenced to 11 years in prison.)

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One year ago: The Trump campaign continued with its unprecedented efforts to overturn the results of the November presidential election; a petition asked the Supreme Court to reverse a trio of Pennsylvania Supreme Court cases having to do with mail-in ballots, and also asked that the state General Assembly be allowed to pick its own slate of electors. Several European Union nations banned flights from the U.K. and others were considering such action, all in hopes of blocking a new strain of coronavirus sweeping across southern England from establishing a strong foothold on the continent.

Today's Birthdays: Original Mouseketeer Tommy Cole (TV: "The Mickey Mouse Club") is 80. R&B singer-musician Walter "Wolfman" Washington is 78. Rock musician-music producer Bobby Colomby is 77. Rock musician Peter Criss is 76. Former U.S. Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue is 75. Psychic/illusionist Uri Geller is 75. Producer Dick Wolf ("Law & Order") is 75. Rock musician Alan Parsons is 73. Actor Jenny Agutter is 69. Actor Michael Badalucco is 67. Actor Blanche Baker is 65. Rock singer Billy Bragg is 64. Rock singer-musician Mike Watt (The Secondmen, Minutemen, FIREHOSE) is 64. Actor Joel Gretsch is 58. Country singer Kris Tyler is 57. Rock singer Chris Robinson is 55. Actor Nicole deBoer is 51. Movie director Todd Phillips is 51. Singer David Cook ("American Idol") is 39. Actor Jonah Hill is 38. Actor Bob Morley is 37. Singer JoJo is 31. Actor Colin Woodell is 30.