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“Extend yourself in kindness
to other human beings
wherever you can.”

-Oprah Winfrey



UpComing Events

Monday, Dec. 27

6 p.m.: Boys Basketball at Jamestown College Classic (Harold Newman Arena), Groton Area vs. Kindred, N.D.

Thursday, Dec. 30

9:30 a.m.: Wrestling at Webster

Friday, Dec. 31

Girls Basketball at Webster. C game at 11 a.m. followed by JV and then 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
Paul's Cell/Text: 605-397-7460

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.
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Elementary Winter Music Concert

The Groton Area Elementary students put on its winter music concert Wednesday afternoon in the GHS Gym. It was a pack house for the concert. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

South Dakota Snowmobile Trails Open; Officials Remind Riders Many Portions of Those Trails Are Closed To ATV Use

PIERRE, S.D. –The official start of the Black Hills snowmobile season began on Dec. 15, with the opening of the trails system there. South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks (GFP) officials remind the public that many portions of those trails are closed to ATV users.

“We don’t have much rideable snow, yet, and ATV users can cause potential damage to the trails,” said Black Hills trails manager Shannon Percy. “Many portions of the snowmobile trail system travel through private property that is leased for snowmobile use only. With the low snow accumulation, the gates for the snowmobile trails are open, but UTV and ATV users must remember that these trails are not available to them.”

Though the trails are open, they are currently not being groomed because of low snow amounts. Snowmobile trail maps can be picked up at various businesses along the trails. Riders can request a copy by calling 605.584.3896 or 605.773.2885.

“We encourage all recreational riders to be aware of the trail systems and get a snowmobile map,” Percy said. “On the snowmobile trail map, everything that is colored in white is private leased land designed specifically for snowmobile use only.”

Trail condition updates are posted to Twitter accounts dedicated to both the Black Hills and the East River trails (twitter.com/SDsnowBHills and twitter.com/SDsnowEast). With various cameras along the trails, current images of snow conditions can be found online at gfp.sd.gov/snowmobiling.

A \$20 snowmobile motorcycle trail pass is available for residents who use a motorcycle conversion kit. Those permits can be picked up at the Black Hills Trails office in Lead, 605.584.3896, or at Farm Island Recreation Area in Pierre, 605.773.2885.

The snowmobile season runs until March 31.

Conde National League

Dec. 20 Team Standings: Pirates 6, Giants 6, Mets 5, Tigers 4, Cubs 2, Braves 1

Men’s High Games: Butch Farmen 264, 214; Ryan Bethke 238; Justin Buckley 224

Men’s High Series: Butch Farmen 630, Ryan Bethke 545, Justin Buckley 493

Women’s High Games: Amanda Morehouse 185, Michelle Johnson 170, Sam Bahr 156

Women’s High Series: Michelle Johnson 417, Joyce Walter 407, Vickie Kramp 390

First COVID-19 Omicron Variant Case Detected in South Dakota

PIERRE, S.D. – The South Dakota Department of Health (SD-DOH) confirms that the B.1.1.529 variant ('Omicron' variant) of COVID-19 has been detected in South Dakota. The findings were verified by the Public Health Laboratory in Pierre. While only one case of the variant has been identified in Minnehaha County among a male in his 20's, it is safe to assume other cases across the state may exist given the variant's increased transmission.

"The best way to protect yourself from severe disease with this variant is to get vaccinated," said Joshua Clayton, State Epidemiologist. "We urge South Dakotans to monitor for symptoms and get tested as soon as they experience symptoms."

Concerns of the 'Omicron' variant include a greater rate of transmission from person to person, reduced effectiveness of existing treatments, and reduced protection of the COVID-19 vaccine. However, currently available vaccines have so far proven effective to protect people against hospitalization and death from COVID-19.

According to the CDC, symptoms associated with COVID-19 include:

- Fever or Chills;
- Cough;
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing;
- Fatigue;
- Muscle or body aches / Headaches; and
- New loss of taste or smell

The 'Omicron' variant was first detected in South Africa in November and was first detected in the United States on December 1. For additional information on all the variants from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [click here](#).

The SD-DOH also wants to remind residents of risk-mitigation precautions they can take to protect themselves from COVID-19 like:

- Practicing good hygiene (handwashing, cleaning surfaces, etc.);
- Physical distancing;
- Staying home when sick;
- Wearing a mask in crowded/confined spaces (ie. Airports); and
- Choosing to get a COVID-19 vaccine / regular testing.

For the latest news and COVID-19 available resources in South Dakota, visit DOH.SD.GOV.

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SENIOR MEALS PROGRAM

JANUARY 2022

month/year

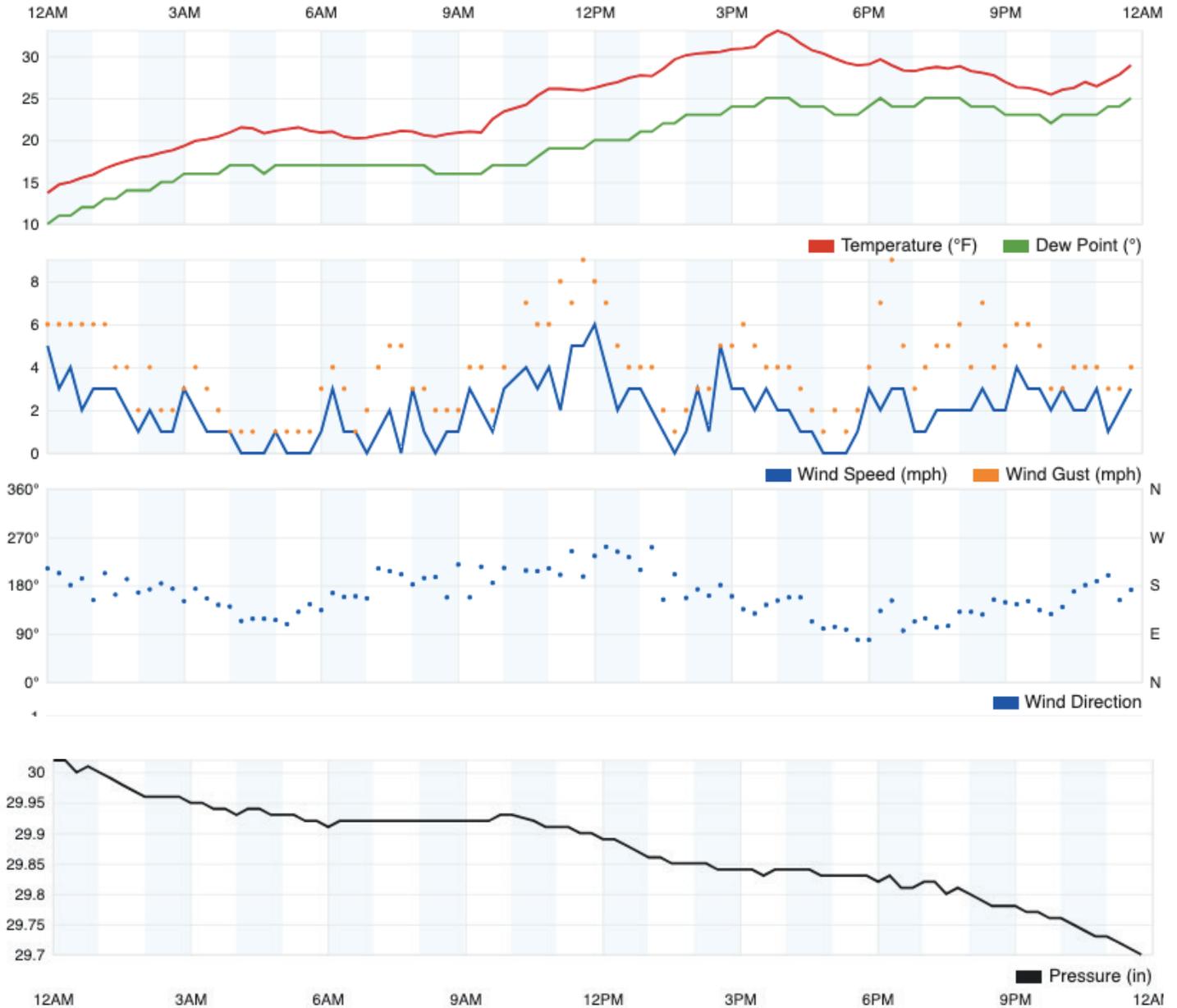
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MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
3 DRI-34 Spanish Rice/Hamburger Green Beans Mandarin Oranges Chocolate Pudding Whole Wheat Bread	4 DRI-54 BBQ Chicken Baked Potato w/S.Cream Carrots Fruit Whole Wheat Bread	5 DRI-36 Beef Stroganoff Noodles Mixed Vegetables Angel Food Cake w/ Strawberries Whole Wheat Bread	6 DRI-47 Ham and Bean Soup Egg Salad Sandwich Tomato Spoon Salad Applesauce	7 DRI-27 Lemon Baked Fish Rice Pilaf California Blend Veggies Fruit Crisp Whole Wheat Bread
10 DRI-40 Ranch Chicken Breast Boiled Potato Squash Fruit Whole Wheat Bread	11 Hamburger w/ Bun Oven Roasted Potatoes Mixed Vegetables Fruit Ice Cream Sundae	12 DRI-28 Scalloped Potato/Ham Peas Sunset Salad Cookie Whole Wheat Bread	13 DRI-48 Roast Beef Mashed Potatoes/Gravy Carrots Peach Cobbler Whole Wheat Bread	14 DRI-39 Tuna Noodle Casserole Broccoli Swedish Apple Pie Square Whole Wheat Bread
17 DRI-64 Lasagna Rotini Tossed Salad/Dressing Ambrosia Fruit Salad Cookie Whole Wheat Bread	18 DRI-24 Hot Turkey Sandwich Macaroni Salad Mandarin Orange Dessert Sherbet	19 DRI-29 Oven Fried Chicken Mashed Potatoes Mixed Vegetables Buttermilk Biscuits Banana Pudding w/Bananas	20 DRI-18 Sweet and Sour Pork Steamed Rice Carrot & Broccoli Medley Honey Fruit Salad Whole Wheat Bread	21 DRI-33 Chili Cornbread Coleslaw Lime Pear Jello
24 DRI-51 Creamed Chicken Buttermilk Biscuit Peas Mandarin Oranges Cookie	25 DRI-49 Salisbury Steak Mashed Potatoes/Gravy Coleslaw Fruit Frosted Brownie Whole Wheat Bread	26 DRI-57 Baked Chicken Breast Noodles Romanoff Lemon Buttered Broccoli Pineapple Strawberry Ambrosia Whole Wheat Bread	27 DRI-8 Ham/Raisin Sauce Sweet Potatoes Mixed Vegetables Crazy Cake Dinner Roll	28 DRI-35 BBQ Beef Sandwich Potato Salad Carrots & Peas Fresh Fruit
31 DRI-44 Swiss Steak w/Mushroom Gravy/Mashed Potatoes Mixed Vegetables Pears Whole Wheat Bread				

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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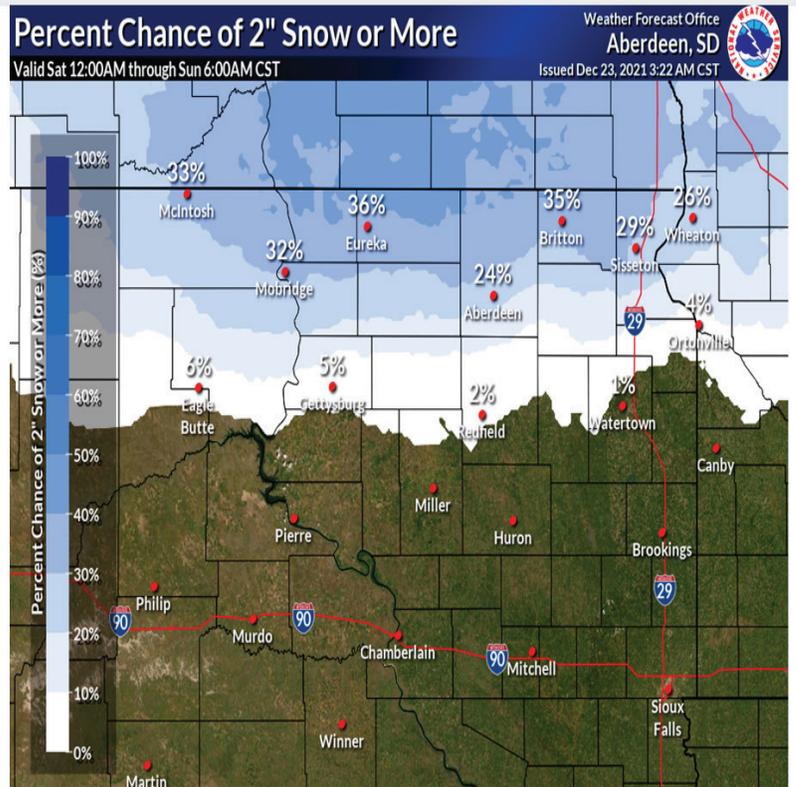
Today	Tonight	Friday	Friday Night	Christmas Day
				
Mostly Sunny	Mostly Cloudy	Mostly Sunny	Partly Cloudy then Slight Chance Snow	Chance Snow
High: 39 °F	Low: 27 °F	High: 41 °F	Low: 9 °F	High: 16 °F

Christmas Snow Possible

December 23, 2021 3:52 AM

Key Items

- Accumulating snow possible on Saturday
- 10-20 mph north winds with higher gusts possible
- Additional snow and even a mix of precipitation types possible Sunday & Monday
- Colder air to follow for Sunday and Monday



A winter system will move across the region late Friday night through early Saturday evening. Light snow accumulation appears possible during that time. #sdwx #mnwx

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Today in Weather History

December 23, 1987: Five to sixteen inches of snow fell in 24 hours in east-central and southeast South Dakota from the morning of the 23rd through the morning of the 24th. Some of the more significant amounts measured were 9 inches at Huron, 10 inches at Mitchell, Platte and Brookings, twelve inches at Chamberlain, and sixteen inches at Alpena. Heavy snow also fell in southwestern Minnesota, with Big Stone and Traverse Counties in the west-central portion of the state missing out on the heaviest snow. Considerable blowing and drifting snow hampered removal, particularly in South Dakota, due to reduced visibilities. Snowfall amounts also included three inches at Castlewood, five inches at Clear Lake, and six inches at Bryant.

December 23, 1996: Blizzard conditions developed across northeast South Dakota and west-central Minnesota in the late afternoon of the 23rd and continued into the late evening. Visibilities were frequently below one-quarter of a mile. Two to six inches of new snowfall combined with the already significant snow cover and north winds of 20 to 40 mph to cause widespread blizzard conditions and heavy drifting on area roads. Travel was significantly impacted if not impossible, and one fatality resulted from a head-on collision. Some snowfall amounts in Minnesota included 5 inches at Artichoke Lake and 6 inches at Wheaton and Browns Valley. In South Dakota, 7 inches fell at Britton, Webster, and Clear Lake, with 6 inches at Sisseton and 5 inches at Summit.

1811 - A cold storm hit Long Island sound with a foot of snow, gale force winds, and temperatures near zero. During the storm many ships were wrecked, and in some cases entire crews perished. (David Ludlum)

1921: An estimated F3 tornado struck the town of Clarkedale, Arkansas, killing six and injuring 60 others. Four people died in the destruction of the Banks and Danner store, where 50 people were doing their Christmas shopping.

1924: A storm producing winds of 70 mph caused extensive damage to Sydney, Australia during the evening hours.

1955 - The barometric pressure dipped to 28.97 inches (981 millibars) at Boise ID, an all-time record for that location. (The Weather Channel)

1982 - A major winter storm struck Colorado producing heavy snow and blizzard conditions. A record two feet of snow was reported at Stapleton Airport in Denver, which was shut down for 33 hours. Up to 44 inches of snow fell in the foothills surrounding Denver. The storm hurt the ski industry as skiers were unable to make it out of Denver to the slopes, and the closed airport became a campground for vacationers. (23rd-25th) (The Weather Channel) (Storm Data)

1983 - The temperature plunged to 50 degrees below zero at Williston ND to equal their all-time record. Minneapolis MN reported an afternoon high of 17 degrees below zero, and that evening strong northerly winds produced wind chill readings of 100 degrees below zero in North Dakota. (The National Weather Summary)

1987 - A winter storm brought heavy snow to the Central Rockies, and also spread a blanket of snow across the Middle Missouri Valley in time for Christmas. Snow and high winds created near blizzard conditions in Wyoming. Snowfall totals in Wyoming ranged up to 25 inches at Casper, with four feet of snow reported at the Hogadon Ski Resort on Casper Mountain. The Wolf Creek Ski Resort in Colorado received 26 inches of snow. Totals in the Middle Missouri Valley ranged up to 16 inches at Alpena SD, with 14 inches at Harrison NE. Strong winds ushered unseasonably cold air into the southwestern U.S. Canyon winds gusting to 100 mph created ground blizzards in Utah. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - An historic arctic outbreak spread to the Gulf Coast Region, and a total of 122 cities across the central and eastern U.S. reported record low temperatures for the date. Forty-one of those cities reported record lows for the month of December, with some cities breaking December records established the previous morning. Morning lows of 11 degrees at New Orleans LA and Lake Charles LA, 4 degrees below zero at San Angelo TX, and 26 degrees below zero at Topeka KS, established all-time records for those four locations. Yankton SD was the cold spot in the nation with a morning low of 31 degrees below zero. A storm system moving across the Florida peninsula and along the Southern Atlantic Coast produced high winds and record snows along the Carolina coast. Snowfall totals of 15 inches at Wilmington NC and 13.3 inches at Cape Hatteras NC were all-time records for those two locations.

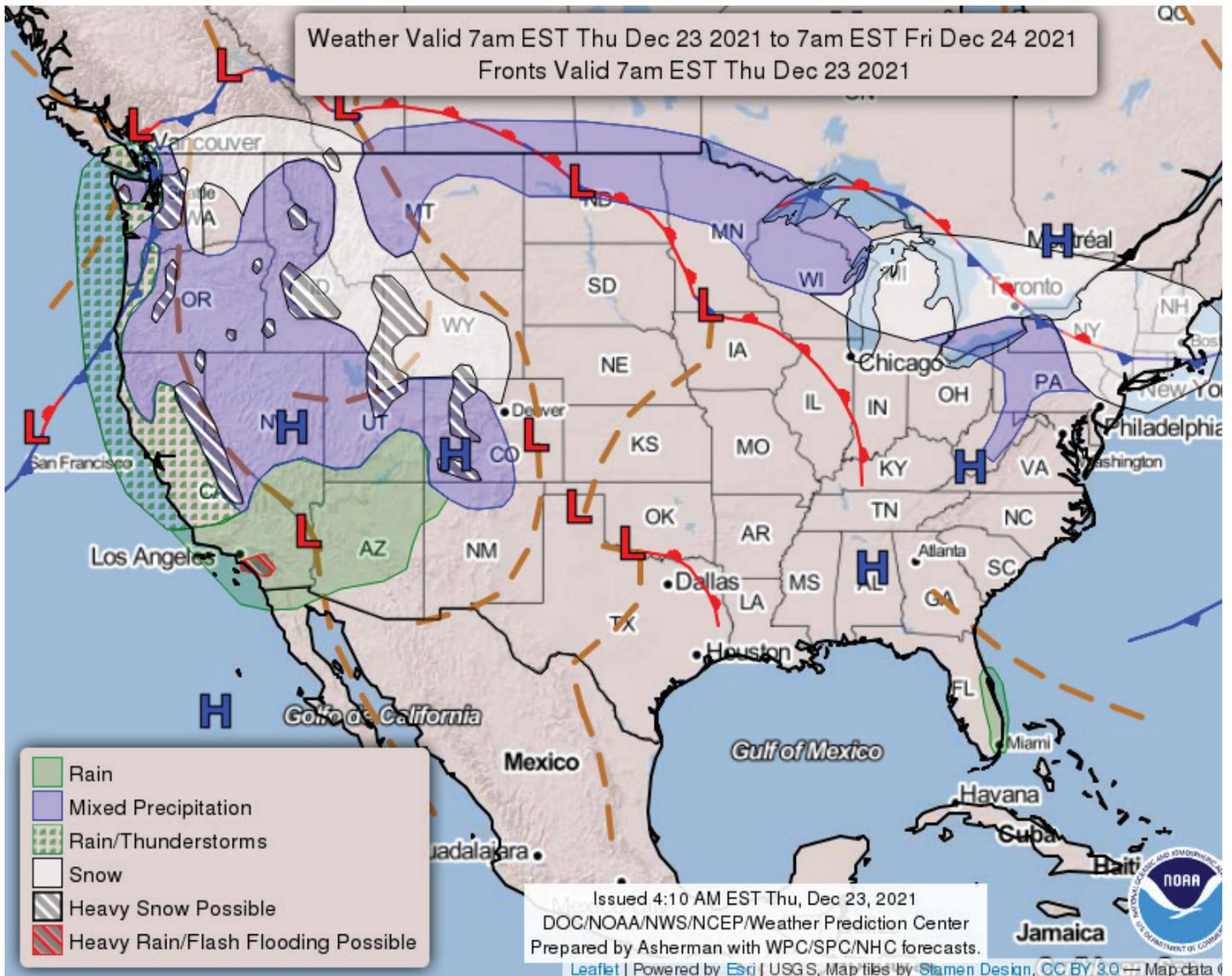
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 33.0 °F at 4:00 PM
Low Temp: 13.7 °F at Midnight
Wind: 9 mph at 6:30 PM
Precip: 0.00

Record High: 54° in 1893
Record Low: -34° in 1983
Average High: 26°F
Average Low: 6°F
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.44
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.47
Average Precip to date: 21.65
Precip Year to Date: 20.03
Sunset Tonight: 4::54:53 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:08:55 AM





THE ANGEL'S VISIT TO MARY

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. Gabriel appeared to her and said, "Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!"

Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think of what the angel could mean. "Don't be afraid, Mary," the angel told her, "for you have found favor with God! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and will name him Jesus. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!"

Mary asked the angel, "But how can this happen? I am a virgin."

The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and He will be called the Son of God. What's more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she's now in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God."

Mary responded, "I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true." And though the angel left her, she was not alone.

Prayer: Thank You, Father, for Your presence and the peace and protection that is ours when we are obedient to Your voice. Give us Your courage to be faithful to Your plan to fulfill Your purpose for our lives. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Luke 1:26-38 Don't be afraid, Mary," the angel told her, "for you have found favor with God! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and will name him Jesus.

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2021 Community Events

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

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The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

Subscription Form

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News from the Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Dakota Cash

01-02-05-06-24

(one, two, five, six, twenty-four)

Estimated jackpot: \$24,000

Lotto America

05-20-21-33-41, Star Ball: 8, ASB: 3

(five, twenty, twenty-one, thirty-three, forty-one; Star Ball: eight; ASB: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$5.25 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$187 million

Powerball

07-16-19-48-68, Powerball: 15, Power Play: 2

(seven, sixteen, nineteen, forty-eight, sixty-eight; Powerball: fifteen; Power Play: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$378 million

Gilyard II leads Kansas City over South Dakota 68-57

VERMILLION, S.D. (AP) — Evan Gilyard II, despite a twisted ankle, had a career-high 31 points with five 3-pointers as Kansas City defeated South Dakota 68-57 on Wednesday night.

Arkel Lamar had 14 points for Kansas City (6-6, 1-1 Summit League). Marvin Nesbitt Jr. added seven rebounds.

Mason Archambault had 14 points for the Coyotes (7-6, 0-2). Tasos Kamateros added 10 rebounds and five assists. Hunter Goodrick had seven rebounds.

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

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

Wilson carries South Dakota State over Oral Roberts 82-76

BROOKINGS, S.D. (AP) — Douglas Wilson had 21 points as South Dakota State extended its home win streak to seven games, defeating Oral Roberts 82-76 on Wednesday night.

Baylor Scheierman added 20 points for South Dakota State (11-4, 2-0 Summit League). Zeke Mayo had 13 points.

Max Abmas had 19 points for the Golden Eagles (7-6, 1-1). Kareem Thompson added 19 points and seven rebounds. Trey Phipps had 10 points.

DeShang Weaver, the Golden Eagles' second leading scorer heading into the matchup at 11.0 points per game, was held to five points. He made 1 of 5 from beyond the arc.

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

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Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined
Yankton Press & Dakotan. December 21, 2021.

Editorial: CRT Legislation Could Produce Problems

Gov. Kristi Noem is laying out a decidedly right-wing agenda ahead of South Dakota's 2022 legislative session, which also kicks off an election year in this state. Last week, she unveiled legislation addressing school prayer (sort of) and transgender athletes, and on Monday, she took aim at Critical Race Theory (CRT).

But, like her prayer legislation — which really doesn't do much to specifically address prayer at all — her CRT proposal is a vague measure designed more to hit some hot-button culture war topics than to deal with relevant issues.

First, this is a reminder of how CRT is defined, according to EdWeek.org: "The core idea is that race is a social construct, and that racism is not merely the product of individual bias or prejudice, but also something embedded in legal systems and policies."

Meanwhile, it has been reported that Critical Race Theory is not currently taught anywhere in the state, either in public school or at the college level. One South Dakota university official told the Sioux Falls Argus-Leader last summer that he had to turn to the Internet to find out what Critical Race Theory even was when it became a conservative battle cry.

Thus, this is much more about political calculus than about classroom education.

In a press release announcing the anti-CRT legislation, the governor stated, "Americans believe 'all men are created equal,' and we also believe the American dream is available to all regardless of race, color or national origin. Our schools should teach our children our nation's true and honest history. They should teach about our successes in establishing a country that is a beacon of freedom to the world and our mistakes along the way."

That seems sensible, at least on the surface.

But once again, like the prayer measure, it wades into nebulous territory, being purposely vague so that its intent may dwell in the eye of the beholder.

The proposal is more interesting to consider in the light of last year's effort to redefine social studies standards in the state. After a task force submitted a proposal and mission statement that included a strong Native American component, the final document was altered, removing many of the references to Native American culture. Amid an uproar, Noem eventually put the process on hold, then decided to start over.

That might cast a little more insight into the intent of the proposed CRT legislation.

Also, we must reiterate the very real concern that "banning CRT" will become a rallying cry (or an excuse) to purge some racial issues out of American history altogether.

In Tennessee earlier this fall, a group called Moms for Liberty filed a complaint with that state's Department of Education (DOE) that a textbook that focuses on civil rights leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. violates that state's CRT ban, Newsweek reported. The group claimed that the book violated the law's mandate that individuals should not "feel discomfort, guilt, anguish or another form of psychological distress solely because of the individual's race or sex." (Noem's proposal just happens to feature very similar language.) Tennessee's DOE rejected the claim.

Nevertheless, the danger remains that some might use an anti-CRT law to delete such elements from a school curriculum, or that a school district might shy away from any material that could be construed in a CRT context. The proposal also works with a lot of subjectivity: For instance, how does a law define "discomfort" or "distress" in this context?

So, the proposal addresses a problem that technically does not exist in this state, but it could be used to impact the teaching of other matters, such as slavery or Native American land and cultural issues.

The bottom line is, this legislation could create far more problems than it addresses.

END

Legislators to meet next week on Ravensborg impeachment

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota legislators are set to meet next week to deliberate whether Republican Attorney General Jason Ravensborg should be impeached for his conduct surrounding a fatal car crash last year.

A select committee of nine House members will convene on Tuesday and Wednesday to develop a recommendation to the full body on whether it should impeach Ravensborg, the Sioux Falls Argus Leader reported.

Ravensborg was driving home to Pierre from a political fundraiser on Sept. 12, 2020, when he struck Joseph Boever as Boever was walking on the side of the highway. Ravensborg told a 911 dispatcher he wasn't sure what he hit and it might have been a deer. He said he didn't realize he had hit a person until he returned to the crash scene the next day and found Boever's body.

He pleaded no contest this past August to making an illegal lane change and using a phone while drive. He was fined \$500 for each count and had to pay \$3,742 in court costs.

The select committee will have access to investigators' evidence during its deliberations. Rep. Jon Hansen said he doesn't know what the committee might recommend but to him it matters where Ravensborg was when he hit Boever. When he reported the collision he said he was driving in the middle of the highway but investigators believe he was driving on the shoulder.

Oral arguments set in Mount Rushmore fireworks appeal

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — Oral arguments are set for next month in the latest round in Gov. Kristi Noem's legal fight to shoot off fireworks at Mount Rushmore.

The Rapid City Journal reported Tuesday that a three-judge panel from the 8th U.S. Court of Appeals in St. Louis will hear arguments on Jan 12. Both sides will get 15 minutes to speak.

Noem filed a federal lawsuit after the Biden administration refused to issue the state a permit to shoot off fireworks at Mount Rushmore to celebrate Independence Day this past July. A federal judge rejected her arguments in June, prompting an appeal to the 8th Circuit.

4 vying for Minnehaha County's lone medical pot license

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Four applicants are vying to win Minnehaha County's single medical marijuana dispensary license.

The Sioux Falls Argus Leader reported Tuesday that the applicants include Genesis Farm LLC; GFV Specialty Retail LLC; and two applications from Shangri-La SD, LLC.

The county has 60 days to review the applications and determine if they meet the requirements laid out in the county's marijuana ordinance. The county held a lottery on Friday to determine the order in which the applications will be considered.

The dispensary would be the first in the county since medical marijuana was legalized in South Dakota this summer.

Last monument for Tiananmen massacre removed in Hong Kong

By ZEN SOO Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — A monument at a Hong Kong university that was the best-known public remembrance of the Tiananmen Square massacre on Chinese soil was removed early Thursday, wiping out the city's last place of public commemoration of the bloody 1989 crackdown.

For some at the University of Hong Kong, the move reflected the erosion of the relative freedoms they have enjoyed compared to mainland China.

The 8-meter (26-foot) -tall Pillar of Shame, which depicts 50 torn and twisted bodies piled on top of each other, was made by Danish sculptor Jens Galschiot to symbolize the lives lost during the military

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crackdown on pro-democracy protesters in Beijing's Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989.

"They are sending a signal to the students that it is over with the (Hong Kong) democracy movement and that it is over with free speech in Hong Kong," Galschiet said of the monument's removal.

The university said it asked that the sculpture, which had been standing on its campus for more than two decades, be put in storage because it could pose "legal risks."

"No party has ever obtained any approval from the university to display the statue on campus, and the university has the right to take appropriate actions to handle it at any time," it said in a statement after its removal.

Each year on June 4, members of the now-defunct student union would wash the statue to commemorate the massacre. The city, together with Macao, were the only places on Chinese soil where commemorations of the crackdown were allowed.

Authorities have banned annual Tiananmen candlelight vigils for two consecutive years and shut down a private museum documenting the crackdown. The group that organized the annual vigil and ran the museum, the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China, has since disbanded, with some of its key members behind bars.

The dismantling of the sculpture came days after pro-Beijing candidates scored a landslide victory in Hong Kong legislative elections, following amendments to election laws allowing the vetting of candidates to ensure they are "patriots" loyal to Beijing.

Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam traveled to Beijing this week to report on developments in the semi-autonomous Chinese city, where authorities have silenced dissent following Beijing's imposition of a sweeping national security law that appeared to target much of the pro-democracy movement following mass protests in 2019.

The Pillar of Shame became an issue in October, when activists and rights groups opposed a university demand that it be removed following "the latest risk assessment and legal advice." Galschiet offered to take it back to Denmark provided he would not be prosecuted under the national security law, but has not succeeded so far.

Galschiet said he has been promised a spot for the sculpture in a park across from the Chinese Embassy in Washington, D.C., and was also offered places in Norway, Canada and Taiwan.

He compared the removal of the sculpture to "driving a tank through Arlington Cemetery," a burial ground for American war veterans.

"Grave desecration is also very frowned upon in China, but that's really what it is. It is almost a sacred monument," he told The Associated Press. "It is a sculpture for those who died."

Danish Foreign Minister Jeppe Kofod said its removal was another worrying development in Hong Kong.

"The Danish government cannot decide which art other countries' universities choose to exhibit. But for me and the government, the right to speak peacefully -- through speech, art or other means -- is a completely fundamental right for all people. This is also true in Hong Kong," he said.

Billy Kwok, a University of Hong Kong student, said the Pillar of Shame has been treated as part of the university by many who studied there.

"It's the symbol of whether (there is still) ... freedom of speech in Hong Kong," he said.

An employee at the university, Morgan Chan, said its removal "doesn't mean that history will be erased, and removing the pillar doesn't mean people won't learn about the history."

Wang Luyao, a student, had a more mixed reaction.

"To me, because I am from mainland China, perhaps my understanding of the Pillar of Shame is not as deep as the locals or students from Hong Kong and it is not that significant to me," Wang said.

"For me, it's like a landmark which provides an approach to understanding. For the University of Hong Kong, it should also be considered a landmark."

Associated Press writer Jan M. Olsen in Copenhagen contributed to this report.

China puts city of 13 million in lockdown ahead of Olympics

BEIJING (AP) — China plunged a city of 13 million people into lockdown on Thursday to stamp out an increase in coronavirus infections, as the country doubles down on its “zero tolerance” policy just weeks before it is set to host the Winter Olympics.

The restrictions in the northeastern city of Xi’an took effect at midnight Wednesday, with no word on when they might be lifted. They are some of the harshest since China imposed a strict lockdown last year on more than 11 million people in and around the city of Wuhan, where the coronavirus was first detected in late 2019.

One person from each household will be allowed out every two days to buy household necessities, a government order said. Other family members were required to stay at home, although the rule was not being rigorously enforced, according to social media posts. People who happened to be staying in hotels became stuck.

There was no word on whether the new cases were of the recently identified omicron variant that appears more contagious and is driving surges in many parts of the world — or the previous version, delta. China has reported just seven omicron cases so far, but none in Xi’an.

Though the latest outbreak is 1,000 kilometers (about 620 miles) southwest of the Olympic host city of Beijing, any sign that the pandemic might be worsening in China will raise questions about whether and how it will manage to welcome thousands of athletes, officials and journalists when the Games open in just weeks on Feb. 4.

On the one hand, there is a tremendous amount of national pride and investment riding on the Olympics and few would want a cancellation, postponement or dramatic reimagining at this late stage. On the other, Chinese authorities have adopted draconian measures throughout the pandemic under their policy of seeking to stamp out every last case — and it’s hard to see how welcoming so many people from abroad will square with that strategy.

That “zero tolerance” policy, which has led to frequent lockdowns, universal masking and mass testing, has not been entirely successful. It has resulted in massive disruptions to travel and trade, but Beijing credits it with largely containing the spread of the virus. Overall, China has reported 4,636 deaths and 100,644 cases of COVID-19.

Xi’an — the capital of Shaanxi province, famed for its imperial relics, as well as a major center of industry — reported another 63 locally transmitted cases on Thursday, pushing the city’s total to at least 211 over the past week.

China has also been dealing with a substantial coronavirus outbreak in several cities in the eastern province of Zhejiang near Shanghai, although isolation measures there have been more narrowly targeted.

“We are not receiving any new guests, and no present guests are allowed to leave the hotel,” said a receptionist at the Hanting Hotel in Xi’an, who only gave her surname, Li.

Staff and guests are required to be tested every two days, Li said. “There will be an impact on our business, and we have no idea how long it will last.”

The owner of a local bookshop said he had closed 10 days before, “fearing the worsening of the epidemic situation.”

“I am now staying at home watching television.” said the owner, who gave only his surname, Xiao.

Movement outside his compound requires permission from the local neighborhood committee, he said. “I think the situation will get better eventually, and I don’t worry at all because we have the government behind us,” Xiao said.

This story has been corrected to show that Beijing is northeast of Xi’an, not west.

Putin urges West to act quickly to offer security guarantees

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russian President Vladimir Putin urged the West on Thursday to move quickly to meet

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Russia's demand for security guarantees precluding NATO's expansion to Ukraine and the deployment of the military alliance's weapons there.

Speaking during a marathon annual news conference, the Russian leader welcomed talks with the U.S. that are set to start in Geneva next month, but sternly warned that Moscow expects the discussion to produce quick results.

"We have clearly and precisely let them know that any further NATO expansion eastward is unacceptable," Putin said.

Last week, Moscow submitted draft security documents demanding that NATO deny membership to Ukraine and other former Soviet countries and roll back the alliance's military deployments in Central and Eastern Europe. A key principle of the NATO alliance is that membership is open to any qualifying country.

"Is it us who are putting missiles near the U.S. borders?" Putin said. "No, it's the U.S. who came to our home with their missiles. They are already on the threshold of our home. Is it some excessive demand not to place any offensive systems near our home?"

Moscow presented its demand amid soaring tensions over a Russian troop buildup near Ukraine that has stoked fears of a possible invasion. U.S. President Joe Biden warned Putin in a conference call earlier this month that Russia will face "severe consequences" if it attacks Ukraine.

Putin previously denied having plans to launch an attack but has described a NATO expansion and weapons deployment in Ukraine as a "red line."

Asked Thursday if he could provide a guarantee that Russia will not invade Ukraine, Putin snapped in response: "It's you who must give us guarantees and give them immediately, now, and not have idle talk about it for decades."

"How the Americans would respond if we put our missiles on the U.S. borders with Canada or Mexico?" he exclaimed.

The U.S. and its allies have said they won't give Russia the kind of guarantee on Ukraine that Putin wants. American officials are conferring with European allies in advance of the Geneva talks.

The Russian leader charged during his news conference that the West had "cheated, blatantly swindled" Moscow by offering verbal pledges in the 1990s not to expand NATO's presence east and then enlarging to incorporate former Soviet bloc countries in Central and Eastern Europe and the ex-Soviet republics in the Baltics.

Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic joined NATO in 1999, followed in 2004 by Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and the former Soviet republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. In subsequent years, Albania, Croatia, Montenegro and North Macedonia also joined, bringing NATO's membership to 30 nations.

"It's not us who threaten anyone," Putin said. "Is it us who came to the U.S. or British borders? No, they have come to us, and they now say that Ukraine will be in NATO."

He accused the West of trying to make Ukraine "anti-Russia, constantly beefed up with modern weapons and brainwashing the population."

Russia can't keep living in anticipation of looming security threats posed by possible deployment of Western weapons in Ukraine, Putin said.

"Should Russia live constantly looking back at what's going on and what new weapon systems are put there?" he exclaimed. "We need to think about ensuring our security."

He argued that Western weapons could encourage hawkish forces in Ukraine to attempt to regain control over Russia-backed separatist regions by force and even try to reclaim Crimea, which Russia annexed from Ukraine in 2014.

The Russian leader claimed that Western expressions of concern about an alleged Russian invasion could be a prelude to a possible attempt by Ukraine to launch an offensive against the rebels in the east following two botched attempts in the past.

"There is an impression that they are preparing a third military operation and warning us not to meddle," he said.

Ukrainian officials have denied an intention to launch an offensive against the separatists.

Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in 2014 and shortly after cast its support behind a separat-

ist rebellion in the country's east. The fighting, which started more than seven years ago, has killed over 14,000 people and devastated Ukraine's industrial heartland, known as the Donbas.

US Rep. Scanlon's carjacked vehicle found; 5 in custody

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — The vehicle stolen at gunpoint in Philadelphia from U.S. Rep. Mary Gay Scanlon was found in neighboring Delaware with five suspects inside, who were in police custody Thursday, police said.

Scanlon's blue Acura MDX was located Wednesday night in Newark, Delaware, about 45 miles (74 kilometers) from Philadelphia, Delaware State Police said.

The suspects were being processed, police said. Their names have not been released, and no other details were available.

Scanlon, a Democrat, was walking to her parked vehicle after a meeting in the city's FDR Park shortly before 3 p.m. Wednesday when two armed men demanded her keys, police said. She handed them over, and one drove off in the car while the other followed in a dark sport utility vehicle, police said.

Scanlon was physically unharmed, said her spokesperson, Lauren Cox. Several personal and work items were also taken with the vehicle, police said.

"I am relieved that Congresswoman Scanlon was not physically injured, and my thoughts are with her during this difficult time," Police Commissioner Danielle Outlaw said in a statement, vowing that police would provide any support needed.

Scanlon, whose district includes portions of south Philadelphia and neighboring Delaware County, was among elected officials meeting to discuss constituent concerns around ongoing development plans for the park, The Philadelphia Inquirer reported.

Scanlon's office said she expressed gratitude to city police for their quick response and to her local police department and the Sergeant at Arms in Washington for working with Philadelphia police "to ensure her continued safety."

Mayor Jim Kenney said he was "appalled to learn of this violent crime" against the congresswoman, whom he described as his friend and colleague.

"My thoughts are with her during what I'm sure is a traumatic time," he said in a Twitter post.

"Everyone deserves to feel safe in our city, and sadly that hasn't always been the case this year," Kenney said. "It's disheartening and infuriating that criminals feel emboldened to commit such a reckless crime in the middle of the day in what should be a place of peace—one of our city's parks."

Buttigieg doles out \$241M to US ports to boost supply chain

By HOPE YEN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg is awarding more than \$241 million in grants to bolster U.S. ports, part of the Biden administration's near-term plan to address America's clogged supply chain with infrastructure improvements to speed the flow of goods.

The transportation money is being made available immediately to 25 projects in 19 states. Next year, the amount of money for port improvements will nearly double to \$450 million in grants annually for five years under President Joe Biden's new infrastructure law.

"U.S. maritime ports play a critical role in our supply chains," Buttigieg said with Thursday's announcement. "These investments in our nation's ports will help support American jobs, efficient and resilient operations and faster delivery of goods to the American people."

Biden on Wednesday touted the coming grants as one of a series of efforts that will alleviate supply bottlenecks over the short and long term.

"Earlier this fall we heard a lot of dire warnings about supply chain problems leading to a crisis around the holidays, so we acted," Biden said. "We brought together business and labor leaders to solve problems and the much predicted crisis didn't occur. Packages are moving. Gifts are being delivered. Shelves are not empty."

The grant money includes \$52.3 million to help boost rail capacity at the port in Long Beach, Calif., with

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a new locomotive facility, 10,000-foot support track and extensions of five existing tracks to speed up freight movement while cutting down the number of truck trips required to do that.

Other recipients include:

- Portsmouth, Virginia, \$20 million, to help build out a supply chain for the offshore wind industry.
- Brunswick, Georgia, \$14.6 million, to build a fourth berth for cargo ships at Colonel's Island Terminal.
- Houston, \$18.3 million, to help pay for a 39-acre greenspace at the Bayport Container Terminal.
- Tell City, Indiana, \$1.6 million, to construct a 40-foot diameter pier on the Ohio River that can be used direct barge-to-truck unloading of cargo.
- Delcambre, Louisiana, \$2 million, for dock restoration and climate resiliency.

In recent months, higher prices have eaten into wages and turned public sentiment on the economy against Biden in polls. One of the obstacles for reducing inflation amid a coronavirus pandemic has been backlogged ports with ships waiting to dock at major transit hubs, causing shortages and leaving some store shelves depleted.

Buttigieg's announcement seeks to build upon recent moves by the Transportation Department to reduce supply chain congestion, such as by allowing port authorities to redirect leftover money from grant projects. For example, the Georgia Ports Authority is using \$8 million to convert its inland facilities for the port of Savannah into container yards, freeing up dock space and speeding the flow of goods to their final destinations. Buttigieg last Friday toured the port, which his department says has seen the number of ships waiting at anchor fall from over 30 to six last week, while long dwelling containers have been cut in half.

Earlier this year, the Biden administration sought to reduce delays by working to move major ports to 24/7 operations. The administration also is seeking to improve working recruitment and retention in the trucking industry.

Still, supply chain issues linger, and the steps taken by the administration have shown that there is no quick fix to the problems that have been hurting smaller businesses and causing consumers to face higher prices. The Transportation Department said Thursday the projects receiving grants vary widely in readiness to get off the ground and it could take months before consumers can start to feel the effects from the improvements.

In Africa, rescuing the languages that Western tech ignores

By MATT O'BRIEN and CHINEDU ASADU Associated Press

LAGOS, Nigeria (AP) — Computers have become amazingly precise at translating spoken words to text messages and scouring huge troves of information for answers to complex questions. At least, that is, so long as you speak English or another of the world's dominant languages.

But try talking to your phone in Yoruba, Igbo or any number of widely spoken African languages and you'll find glitches that can hinder access to information, trade, personal communications, customer service and other benefits of the global tech economy.

"We are getting to the point where if a machine doesn't understand your language it will be like it never existed," said Vukosi Marivate, chief of data science at the University of Pretoria in South Africa, in a call to action before a December virtual gathering of the world's artificial intelligence researchers.

American tech giants don't have a great track record of making their language technology work well outside the wealthiest markets, a problem that's also made it harder for them to detect dangerous misinformation on their platforms.

Marivate is part of a coalition of African researchers who have been trying to change that. Among their projects is one that found machine translation tools failed to properly translate online COVID-19 surveys from English into several African languages.

"Most people want to be able to interact with the rest of the information highway in their local language," Marivate said in an interview. He's a founding member of Masakhane, a pan-African research project to improve how dozens of languages are represented in the branch of AI known as natural language processing. It's the biggest of a number of grassroots language technology projects that have popped up

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from the Andes to Sri Lanka.

Tech giants offer their products in numerous languages, but they don't always pay attention to the nuances necessary for those apps work in the real world. Part of the problem is that there's just not enough online data in those languages — including scientific and medical terms — for the AI systems to effectively learn how to get better at understanding them.

Google, for instance, offended members of the Yoruba community several years ago when its language app mistranslated Esu, a benevolent trickster god, as the devil. Facebook's language misunderstandings have been tied to political strife around the world and its inability to tamp down harmful misinformation about COVID-19 vaccines. More mundane translation glitches have been turned into joking online memes.

Omolewa Adedipe has grown frustrated trying to share her thoughts on Twitter in the Yoruba language because her automatically translated tweets usually end up with different meanings.

One time, the 25-year-old content designer tweeted, "T'Ílù ò bà dùn, T'Ílù ò bà t'òrò. Èyin l'ẹ̀mò bí ẹ̀ ẹ̀ ẹ̀ ẹ̀," which means, "If the land (or country, in this context) is not peaceful, or merry, you're responsible for it." Twitter, however, managed to end up with the translation: "If you are not happy, if you are not happy."

For complex Nigerian languages like Yoruba, those accent marks -- often associated with tones -- make all the difference in communication. 'Ogun', for instance, is a Yoruba word that means war, but it can also mean a state in Nigeria (Ògùn), god of iron (Ògún), stab (Ògún), twenty or property (Ogún).

"Some of the bias is deliberate given our history," said Marivate, who has devoted some of his AI research to the southern African languages of Xitsonga and Setswana spoken by his family members, as well as to the common conversational practice of "code-switching" between languages.

"The history of the African continent and in general in colonized countries, is that when language had to be translated, it was translated in a very narrow way," he said. "You were not allowed to write a general text in any language because the colonizing country might be worried that people communicate and write books about insurrections or revolutions. But they would allow religious texts."

Google and Microsoft are among the companies that say they are trying to improve technology for so-called "low-resource" languages that AI systems don't have enough data for. Computer scientists at Meta, the company formerly known as Facebook, announced in November a breakthrough on the path to a "universal translator" that could translate multiple languages at once and work better with lower-resourced languages such as Icelandic or Hausa.

That's an important step, but at the moment, only large tech companies and big AI labs in developed countries can build these models, said David Ifeoluwa Adelani. He's a researcher at Saarland University in Germany and another member of Masakhane, which has a mission to strengthen and spur African-led research to address technology "that does not understand our names, our cultures, our places, our history."

Improving the systems requires not just more data but careful human review from native speakers who are underrepresented in the global tech workforce. It also requires a level of computing power that can be hard for independent researchers to access.

Writer and linguist Kola Tubosun created a multimedia dictionary for the Yoruba language and also created a text-to-speech machine for the language. He is now working on similar speech recognition technologies for Nigeria's two other major languages, Hausa and Igbo, to help people who want to write short sentences and passages.

"We are funding ourselves," he said. "The aim is to show these things can be profitable."

Tubosun led the team that created Google's "Nigerian English" voice and accent used in tools like maps. But he said it remains difficult to raise the money needed to build technology that might allow a farmer to use a voice-based tool to follow market or weather trends.

In Rwanda, software engineer Remy Muhire is helping to build a new open-source speech dataset for the Kinyarwanda language that involves a lot of volunteers recording themselves reading Kinyarwanda newspaper articles and other texts.

"They are native speakers. They understand the language," said Muhire, a fellow at Mozilla, maker of the Firefox internet browser. Part of the project involves a collaboration with a government-supported

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smartphone app that answers questions about COVID-19. To improve the AI systems in various African languages, Masakhane researchers are also tapping into news sources across the continent, including Voice of America's Hausa service and the BBC broadcast in Igbo.

Increasingly, people are banding together to develop their own language approaches instead of waiting for elite institutions to solve problems, said Damián Blasi, who researches linguistic diversity at the Harvard Data Science Initiative.

Blasi co-authored a recent study that analyzed the uneven development of language technology across the world's more than 6,000 languages. For instance, it found that while Dutch and Swahili both have tens of millions of speakers, there are hundreds of scientific reports on natural language processing in the Western European language and only about 20 in the East African one.

O'Brien reported from Providence, Rhode Island.

Pope demands humility in new zinger-filled Christmas speech

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Pope Francis urged Vatican cardinals, bishops and bureaucrats Thursday to embrace humility this Christmas season, saying their pride, self-interest and the "glitter of our armor" was perverting their spiritual lives and corrupting the church's mission.

As he has in the past, Francis used his annual Christmas address to take Vatican administrators to task for their perceived moral and personal failings, denouncing in particular those pride-filled clerics who "rigidly" hide behind Catholic Church traditions rather than seek out the neediest with humility.

As they have in the past, cardinals and bishops sat stone-faced as they listened to Francis lecture them in the Hall of Blessings, which was otherwise decked out in jolly twinkling Christmas trees and poinsettias.

"The humble are those who are concerned not simply with the past but also with the future, since they know how to look ahead, to spread their branches, remembering the past with gratitude," Francis told them. "The proud, on the other hand, simply repeat, grow rigid and enclose themselves in that repetition, feeling certain about what they know and fearful of anything new because they cannot control it."

The proud who are so inward-looking are consumed with their own interests, the pontiff said.

"As a consequence, they neither learn from their sins nor are they genuinely open to forgiveness. This is a tremendous corruption disguised as a good. We need to avoid it," he added.

Since becoming pope in 2013, Francis has used his Christmas address to rail against the Curia, as the Holy See's bureaucracy is known, denouncing the "spiritual Alzheimer's" that some members suffer and the resistance he had encountered to his efforts to reform and revitalize the institution and the broader Catholic Church.

Those reforms kicked into high gear this year, and some of the top Catholic hierarchy bore the brunt as Francis ordered a 10% pay cut for cardinals, imposed a 40-euro (\$45) gift cap for Holy See personnel and passed a law allowing cardinals and bishops to be criminally prosecuted by the Vatican's own tribunal.

On top of that, Francis added his Christmas greetings in the form of another public brow-beating of Vatican clerics, who normally are treated with the utmost deference by their underling and the faithful at large.

Francis told them to stop hiding behind the "armor" of their titles and to recognize that they, like the Biblical figure of Naaman, a wealthy and decorated general, were lepers in need of healing.

"The story of Naaman reminds us that Christmas is the time when each of us needs to find the courage to take off our armor, discard the trappings of our roles, our social recognition and the glitter of this world and adopt the humility of Naaman," he said.

Francis also repeated his call for tradition-minded clerics to stop living in the past, saying their obsession with old doctrine and liturgy concealed a "spiritual worldliness" that was corrupting.

"Seeking those kinds of reassurance is the most perverse fruit of spiritual worldliness, for it reveals a lack of faith, hope and love; it leads to an inability to discern the truth of things," he said.

Francis this year took his biggest step yet to rein in the traditionalist wing of the church, reimposing

restrictions on celebrating the old Latin Mass that Pope Benedict XVI had relaxed in 2007.

He intensified those restrictions last weekend with a new set of rules that forbids even the publication of Tridentine Mass times in parish bulletins.

Francis said the proud who remain stuck in the past, "enclosed in their little world, have neither past nor future, roots or branches, and live with the bitter taste of a melancholy that weighs on their hearts as the most precious of the devil's potions."

"All of us are called to humility, because all of us are called to remember and to give life. We are called to find a right relationship with our roots and our branches. Without those two things, we become sick, destined to disappear," he warned.

2021 Notebook: US withdrawal and Afghanistan's next chapter

By The Associated Press undefined

THE BACKGROUND: For Afghanistan, 2021 was punctuated by the chaos of a U.S. withdrawal and an uncertain next chapter. The Taliban, who were unseated as the country's rulers by a U.S.-led coalition after the 9/11 attacks 20 years ago, could not be stopped by a collapsing Afghan military and Western-backed government that fled. They quickly took power back in mid-August — asked, The Associated Press has revealed, by former President Hamid Karzai to help keep Kabul from falling into chaos and deadly violence.

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

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

The Taliban urge patience but some signs are worrisome: For instance, girls are not allowed to attend high school in most provinces, and though women have returned to their jobs in much of the health care sector, many female civil servants have been barred from coming to work.

However, security has improved under the Taliban, following their crackdown on crime, and humanitarian organizations say they can now reach parts of the country that were previously no-go areas.

Here, Associated Press reporters who covered the Taliban's lightning sweep across the country and the subsequent fallout reflect on the story and their own experiences.

KATHY GANNON, news director, Afghanistan and Pakistan:

This last year has been a particularly tumultuous one. It began really with the announcement by President (Joe) Biden that the last of the U.S. soldiers and NATO's soldiers would leave Afghanistan, but I'm not sure that anyone thought that it would result in such chaos and such real misery for so many. ... Even Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, I think, was really taken by surprise that the Americans were leaving, that NATO would leave. I don't think that he ever felt that they would actually. And certainly we talked at the time to many people within the army, people within the government who were really surprised at the announcement. Even though the U.S. had been talking to the Taliban, had negotiated the agreement, had said that as of May 1st, they would begin this withdrawal, there really was a belief among many Afghans that it would not happen.

Even before the Taliban took power, in 2018 there was a Gallup survey, and it showed that barely 2% of the population had any faith in their future in the next five years. And that was years before the Taliban took power. So the groundwork was already there. People were very frustrated. The poverty level was quite high already. There were very few jobs for people. People felt really discouraged with the future of their country.

So then when the Americans were leaving and then embassies were announcing they were going to close, it was almost like a snowball, gaining, gaining momentum. Rumors spread on social media that said,

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"the Americans will take anybody who shows up at the airport. Just arrive. You don't even need to have your national papers." Well, for many Afghans, I think this was seen as their opportunity for a better life. Their opportunity to go to America, to go to the West, to have a future that they really had not seen as being a possibility in their own country even before the Taliban arrived.

And then, with the arrival of the Taliban, of course, there was tremendous apprehension and tremendous fear, particularly among the young generation who had not been there when the Taliban last ruled between 1996 and 2001. So I think that that all of that led to this massive surge toward the airport in Kabul, and no one was prepared for it.

And for me, in many ways, that really was a bit of an indictment of the last 20 years, that there was such a lack of hope and faith in the future. And the civil society, on whom so much faith had been put, seemed to be the first ones to make this rush to the airport because they feared for their lives, they feared for the future. They feared for the future of their children.

So that really contributed to that chaos in those iconic images of young men rushing the C-17 aircraft, hanging on to the wheels, trying to get into the aircraft. All of this uncertainty and fear contributed to that. And really the last 20 years, that didn't give them much hope for the future.

But I want to say there was no evidence — from when the Taliban last ruled — that there would be widespread retribution killings. Sadly, though, revenge killings have been a hallmark of every regime change in Afghanistan. There were scores of retribution killings when the Taliban were overthrown in 2001 by U.S.-backed Afghan allies, and human rights groups have reported upward of 80 revenge killings, particularly of former military people, by the returning Taliban rulers. However, until now there has been no evidence of systematic retribution.

The fact that the Taliban are here and that the world seems surprised seems a little bit in and of itself surprising, given that there were two years of negotiations with the Taliban, with the plan that at the end of these negotiations, there would be an agreement that would include them in power. And I think the future is still a mystery. The jury is still out on whether the Taliban will make good on some of their promises to guarantee education for girls. Whether they will open up their ranks, whether they will include more people. And I think that there still is not a clear picture of what that will look like. But what there is a clear picture of is that Afghans are desperate for help. The U.N. has said that 98% of Afghans by the end of this year will be in desperate need, and it's still not clear that the world is ready to rise up to the occasion.

FAZEL RAHMAN, senior television producer, Afghanistan:

The biggest surprising and shocking moment for me this year came in the middle of night: Gunmen knocked on the AP bureau's door, looking for us and they were threatening us with death. But we were very, very lucky. Fortunately, they were not able to harm anyone. We don't know who they were. The Taliban's spokesman Suhail Shaheen was notified right away about these people knocking at the AP door. Taliban officials within two days had come to the office, and after looking around, assured our AP people no one would or should enter our premises without our permission. Should anyone do that we were told to call the officials. We have certainly been cautious, but we have not had Taliban or others unlawfully enter our premises.

As an Afghan, I see my people losing their hopes. They lost the achievements of 20 years, two decades, overnight. You know, my daughter cannot go to school. My boys are leaving the house, and she is not able to.

Unfortunately, because the Taliban came to power again, you know it's very difficult for them to leave again, at least for a short time. The good thing is, we have winter ahead of us, which is not usually a fighting time in Afghanistan. And I think we have chances of negotiation.

For a full overview of the events that shaped 2021, "A Year That Changed Us: 12 Months in 150 Photos," a collection of AP photos and journalists' recollections, is available now: <https://www.ap.org/books/a-year-that-changed-us>

Changing climate parches Afghanistan, exacerbating poverty

By ELENA BECATOROS Associated Press

SANG-E-ATASH, Afghanistan (AP) — Fed by rain and snowmelt from mountains, this valley nestled among northwestern Afghanistan's jagged peaks was once fertile. But the climate has changed in the last few decades, locals say, leaving the earth barren and its people struggling to survive.

Many have fled, heading to neighboring Iran or living in abject poverty in camps for the displaced within Afghanistan as repeated droughts parch the land and shrivel pastures.

"I remember from my childhood ... there was a lot of snow in the winters, in spring we had a lot of rain," said 53-year-old Abdul Ghani, a local community leader in the village of Sang-e-Atash, in the hard-struck province of Badghis.

"But since a few years ago there has been drought, there is no snow, there is much less rain. It is not even possible to get one bowl of water from drainpipes to use," he said, as he observed the Red Crescent Society handing out emergency winter food supplies to farmers whose crops have completely failed.

The severe drought, now in its second year, has dramatically worsened the already desperate situation in the country. Battered by four decades of war, Afghans have also had to contend with the coronavirus pandemic and an economy in freefall following the freezing of international funding after the Taliban seized power in mid-August amid a chaotic withdrawal of U.S. and NATO troops. Millions can't feed themselves, and aid groups warn of rising malnutrition and a humanitarian catastrophe.

For many families in the Sang-e-Atash area, the Red Crescent aid is their only lifeline for the harsh winter. The organization's regional head for western Afghanistan, Mustafa Nabikhil, said 558 families had received the food over three days: flour, rice, beans, cooking oil, sugar, salt, tea and high-calorie, vitamin-fortified biscuits.

Badghis's farmers are particularly vulnerable as the region lacks an irrigation system, leaving them dependent on the weather, Nabikhil said.

If it rains, they will eat. If it doesn't, they won't. Their desperation is palpable.

"There is no solution, we are just destroyed," said Ghani. "We can't go anywhere, to a foreign country, we have no money, we have nothing. In the end we must dig our graves and die."

Necephor Mghendi, head of Afghanistan Delegation of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, said drought is leading to "worrying food shortages, with around 22.8 million people — more than 55% of Afghanistan's population — experiencing high levels of acute food shortages."

Severe drought has affected more than 60% of the country's provinces, he said, "but there is no single province not affected since some are facing serious or moderate drought."

"If urgent measures are not taken, there will be a catastrophic humanitarian situation," he said. "It is arguably the worst humanitarian crisis in the world at the moment, and the saddest part is that early action and prompt action could have prevented it from escalating."

For many, conditions are already catastrophic.

"We have nothing," said 45-year-old Juma Gul, one of the many people displaced by drought sitting in a Red Crescent mobile health clinic just outside the Badghis provincial capital of Qala-e-Now. With nine children and a husband unable to find work, her family was surviving on loans from shopkeepers. But even those have dried up, she said.

"Sometimes we find food and sometimes not. We eat only dry bread and green tea. We can't buy flour or rice, it's too expensive."

In the village of Hachka outside Qala-e-Now, farmer Abdul Haqim surveyed his barren field, the icy wind sweeping across the fissures of cracked earth. It used to grow wheat and sustain his family of 18. Now, there is nothing.

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"There is no rain, there is drought," he said. Many people in his village, including three of his adult sons, have left for Iran and he's considering sending a fourth, although the boy is only 12. It's the only way his family can survive.

"My friend, people are leaving this region. Some people even leave their children (behind) and go," he said. Experts predict climate change will make droughts even more frequent and severe. They have been ringing the alarm bell over Afghanistan for years.

"Climate change in Afghanistan is not an uncertain, 'potential' future risk but a very real, present threat - whose impacts have already been felt by millions of farmers and pastoralists across the country," said a 2016 report by the World Food Program, United Nations Environment Program and Afghanistan's National Environmental Protection Agency. The current drought is the worst in decades.

"The effect of climate change and global warming in Afghanistan is very clear in multiple ways," said Assem Mayar, a water resource management expert and PhD candidate at the University of Stuttgart. Over the last two decades, 14% of the country's glaciers have melted, he said, while the frequency of drought has doubled compared to the last decades of the 20th century.

Flood frequency and severity has also increased, while there has been a shift from snow in the early winter to rain in the spring. This disrupts the water balance in the country as snow, by its very nature, remains for longer than rainwater, which runs out of the country in 2-14 days, Mayar explained. Afghanistan also lacks water reservoirs, which are 10 times smaller than those of neighboring countries.

The previous government drew up a drought risk management strategy, Mayar said, but with the change of government in August, everything has stopped.

Deputy Minister for Water Mujib ur Rahman Omar said at a news conference Wednesday that the government had a policy for managing the drought, including projects to build irrigation canals, dams and check dams — small, sometimes temporary dams in waterways — in Badghis province.

"Our technical and experienced colleagues are busy in this," he said, adding that all projects depended on the availability of budgets.

The new deputy governor of Badghis, Taliban special forces fighter Mohibullah Asad, is well aware of the severity of the problem.

"The drought is obvious all over Afghanistan, and it has a greater negative impact on Badghis province," he recently told the AP in the regional governor's building in Qala-e-Now, flanked by an entourage of Taliban fighters.

Although drought has been a problem for years, he said, this year it was particularly severe, affecting about 80-85% of the local population.

His administration was meeting frequently with aid organizations, Asad said, adding that the government itself had no funds to deal with the situation as the previous government had left nothing.

Mayar, the water management expert, said humanitarian investment should focus on small- and medium-scale water projects to reduce the effects of drought.

"The international community should not restrict climate and natural disaster-related funds due to sanctions," he said. "Because climate change continues its effects on Afghanistan."

Abdul Qahar Afghan in Sang-e-Atash, Afghanistan and Rahim Faiez in Islamabad, Pakistan contributed.

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To grandmother's house or no? Omicron disrupts holiday plans

By LAURA UNGAR and TALI ARBEL Associated Press

Dave Fravel and his wife invited several relatives to their Cape Cod home for Christmas to share food, gifts and the togetherness they've longed for during the lonely days of the pandemic. They were also looking forward to a holiday sightseeing trip to New York City.

But the coronavirus spoiled all those plans. With cases surging in their state of Massachusetts and the

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super-infectious omicron variant racing around the world, they feared spreading the virus even before Fravel's 18-year-old son, Colin, came down with COVID-19.

Rich England has been there before. In the summer, when the delta variant was surging, he said no to a Christmastime vacation with his parents and sister's family to London and Scotland. But he, his wife and 2-year-old daughter are keeping plans for a four-day trip from their home in Alexandria, Virginia, to Miami on Dec. 31.

"The safest thing to do would be to say 'OMG, we have to cancel,'" he said. "But there's a lot of letters in the Greek alphabet — there's going to be variants after omicron. You can't just respond to every single variant by shutting down."

For the second year in a row, the ever-morphing virus presents would-be revelers with a difficult choice: cancel holiday gatherings and trips or figure out ways to forge ahead as safely as possible. Many health experts are begging people not to let down their guard.

World Health Organization Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus put it starkly this week when he said that "an event canceled is better than a life canceled."

But pandemic fatigue is real. And while travel restrictions in some places have forced cancellations, many governments have been reluctant to order more lockdowns, leaving decisions about who to see and where to go increasingly in the hands of individuals.

Complicating matters is the mystery that surrounds omicron. Scientists now know it spreads fast — perhaps up to three times faster than the delta variant. It also seems to be better at evading vaccines, although boosters rev up protection, particularly against hospitalization and death. But a crucial question remains: Does omicron cause less severe illness than delta? Some research suggests that it does, but the studies are preliminary.

Even if it is milder, omicron could still overwhelm hospitals because of the sheer number of infections. That makes it difficult to know how far to turn down the dial on the festive season.

In the United States, infections average around 149,000 a day, and officials announced this week that omicron dethroned delta as the dominant variant. In Britain, where an omicron-fueled surge is seen as a harbinger for many other European countries, daily cases topped 100,000 for the first time on Tuesday. France, Spain and Italy are also seeing infection spikes.

Fravel and his wife, Sue Malomo, who are both software developers and have six children between them, are worried about omicron and delta. Fravel, 51, said they nixed their trip to New York City because "the thought of being in those big crowds didn't seem to make a whole lot of sense."

Neither did having lots of people at their house. Typically, 20 to 25 people filter through between Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. But this year, only the kids will come and not all at the same time.

"Right now, the plan is everyone's just kind of staying put in smaller circles or doing FaceTime," Fravel said.

England, an energy lobbyist, also weighed his options — and decided a trip could be made. He and his wife both got booster shots, which reassures him, though his daughter is too young for the vaccine.

"We picked Miami in part because we would be able to eat exclusively outdoors and then spend time on the beach and at the pool," he said. But even he is still hedging: As of Tuesday evening, they were "80/20 going."

Colombia native Julieta Aranguren has already begun her trip. The 18-year-old was on a stopover in Madrid on Wednesday on her way to Dubai, where she planned to spend time with relatives. She spent thousands of dollars on flights and hotels — booked nine months ago — so she said that she didn't consider canceling.

But she still faces the unknown. Her group plans to go shopping, dine out and visit the World Expo in Dubai, so "it would be no fun at all if there were more restrictions," Aranguren said.

It's still unclear which path most people will take. Ryanair, Europe's biggest airline, lowered its forecast for the number of passengers for December from 11 million to 10 million, chief executive Michael O'Leary told the Guardian last week.

Several airlines in the United States remain fairly upbeat.

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For the period from Dec. 17 through Jan. 3, Delta Air Lines says it expects to fly about 8 million people, more than double last year's holiday season but short of the 9.3 million passengers in 2019. American Airlines plans about 5,000 daily flights between Dec. 19 and Jan. 1, up from 3,700 at the same time last year. But there were a lot more — 6,300 — during the 2019 holidays.

Both airlines noted that international travel was the most affected by the omicron variant.

That rings true for Alex Wong. The freelance journalist and radio producer in Toronto canceled a mid-December flight to New York that would have been his first trip since the pandemic began. He worried about being stuck in quarantine upon his return, which would leave him unable to see his family during the holidays.

"Feels like I made the right decision and feel better by the day," he said in a text message. He's getting a booster shot on Wednesday and seeing his parents, who live nearby, this weekend.

That is the sort of balanced calculation many experts recommend.

Matthew Binnicker, director of clinical virology at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, said people should consider taking a rapid test for COVID-19 on the day of a gathering or, better yet, a more accurate PCR test 24 hours in advance. But experts warn that tests are not a firewall against infection.

"It's a good idea to kind of rethink big plans of travel or getting together in large groups," he said.

Small groups of less than 10 people can gather in safety if they ensure that everyone is vaccinated, wear masks indoors and encourage people most vulnerable to severe disease to stay home. Other experts suggest opening windows to improve ventilation and staying outdoors as much as possible.

"To me, the holidays are a time to think about others. This is often expressed through gift giving, charitable donations or volunteering," Binnicker said. "But this year, there's another excellent way to think of others, and that's to take precautions to stop the spread of COVID-19 and influenza."

Associated Press writers Mae Anderson in Nashville, Tennessee, Aritz Parra in Madrid, Emily Schultheis in Vienna and Kelvin Chan in London contributed to this report.

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

Omicron less likely to put you in the hospital, studies say

By LAURA UNGAR and MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writers

Two new British studies provide some early hints that the omicron variant of the coronavirus may be milder than the delta version.

Scientists stress that even if the findings of these early studies hold up, any reductions in severity need to be weighed against the fact omicron spreads much faster than delta and is more able to evade vaccines. Sheer numbers of infections could still overwhelm hospitals.

Still, the new studies released Wednesday seem to bolster earlier research that suggests omicron may not be as harmful as the delta variant, said Manuel Ascano Jr., a Vanderbilt University biochemist who studies viruses.

"Cautious optimism is perhaps the best way to look at this," he said.

An analysis from the Imperial College London COVID-19 response team estimated hospitalization risks for omicron cases in England, finding people infected with the variant are around 20% less likely to go to the hospital at all than those infected with the delta variant, and 40% less likely to be hospitalized for a night or more.

That analysis included all cases of COVID-19 confirmed by PCR tests in England in the first half of December in which the variant could be identified: 56,000 cases of omicron and 269,000 cases of delta.

A separate study out of Scotland, by scientists at the University of Edinburgh and other experts, suggested the risk of hospitalization was two-thirds less with omicron than delta. But that study pointed out that the nearly 24,000 omicron cases in Scotland were predominantly among younger adults ages 20-39.

Younger people are much less likely to develop severe cases of COVID-19.

"This national investigation is one of the first to show that Omicron is less likely to result in COVID-19 hospitalization than Delta," researchers wrote. While the findings are early observations, "they are encouraging," the authors wrote.

The findings have not yet been reviewed by other experts, the gold standard in scientific research.

Ascano noted the studies have limitations. For example, the findings are specific to a certain point in time during a quickly changing situation in the United Kingdom and other countries may not fare the same way.

Matthew Binnicker, director of clinical virology at Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, said that in the Scottish study, the percentage of younger people was almost twice as high for the omicron group compared with the delta group, and that "could have biased the conclusions to less severe outcomes caused by omicron."

He nonetheless said the data were interesting and suggest omicron might lead to less severe disease. But he added: "It's important to emphasize that if omicron has a much higher transmission rate compared to delta, the absolute number of people requiring hospitalization might still increase, despite less severe disease in most cases."

Data out of South Africa, where the variant was first detected, have also suggested omicron might be milder there. Salim Abdool Karim, a clinical infectious disease epidemiologist in South Africa, said earlier this week that the rate of admissions to hospitals was far lower for omicron than it was for delta.

"Our overall admission rate is in the region of around 2% to 4% compared to previously, where it was closer to 20%," he said. "So even though we're seeing a lot of cases, very few are being admitted."

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Hong Kong university removes Tiananmen massacre statue

By KATIE TAM and ZEN SOO Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — A monument at a Hong Kong university that commemorates the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre was removed by workers early Thursday over the objections of its creator from Denmark.

The 8-meter (26-foot) tall Pillar of Shame, which depicts 50 torn and twisted bodies piled on top of each other, was made by Danish sculptor Jens Galschiøt to symbolize the lives lost during the bloody military crackdown on pro-democracy protesters in Beijing's Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989.

Workers barricaded the monument at the University of Hong Kong late Wednesday night. Drilling sounds and loud clanging could be heard coming from the boarded-up site, which was patrolled by guards.

The dismantling of the sculpture came days after pro-Beijing candidates scored a landslide victory in the Hong Kong legislative elections, after amendments in election laws allowed the vetting of all candidates to ensure that they are "patriots" loyal to Beijing.

The removal also happened in the same week that Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam traveled to Beijing to report on developments in the semi-autonomous Chinese city, where authorities have silenced dissent following the implementation of a sweeping national security law that appeared to target much of the pro-democracy movement following mass protests in 2019.

The Pillar of Shame monument became an issue in October, with the university demanding that it be removed, even as activists and rights groups protested. Galschiøt offered to take it back to Denmark provided he was given legal immunity that he won't be persecuted under Hong Kong's national security law, but has not succeeded so far.

"No party has ever obtained any approval from the university to display the statue on campus, and the university has the right to take appropriate actions to handle it at any time," the university said in a statement Thursday.

"Latest legal advice given to the university cautioned that the continued display of the statue would pose legal risks to the university based on the Crimes Ordinance enacted under the Hong Kong colonial

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government.”

The university said that it had requested for the statue to be put in storage and would continue to seek legal advice on follow-up actions.

In October, the university informed the now-defunct candlelight vigil organizer, the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China, that it had to remove the statue following “the latest risk assessment and legal advice.”

The organization had said that it was dissolving, citing a climate of oppression, and that it did not own the sculpture. The university was told to speak to its creator instead.

When reached by The Associated Press, sculptor Galschiøt said he was only aware of what was happening to the sculpture Wednesday from social media and other reports.

“We don’t know exactly what happened, but I fear they destroy it,” he said. “This is my sculpture, and it is my property.”

Galschiøt said that he would sue the university if necessary to protect the sculpture.

He had previously written to the university to assert his ownership of the monument, although his requests had gone largely ignored.

Over 100 pro-democracy activists have been arrested since Beijing implemented the national security law in Hong Kong. It outlaws secession, subversion, terrorism and foreign collusion to intervene in the city’s affairs. Critics say it rolled back freedoms promised to Hong Kong when it was handed over to China by Britain in 1997.

The Pillar of Shame monument has been erected for over two decades, and initially stood at Hong Kong’s Victoria Park before eventually being moved to the University of Hong Kong on a long-term basis.

Each year on June 4, members of the now-defunct student union would wash the statue to commemorate the Tiananmen massacre. The city, together with Macao, were previously the only places on Chinese soil where commemoration of the Tiananmen crackdown was allowed.

Over the past two years, the annual candlelight vigil in Hong Kong had been banned by authorities, who cited public risks from the coronavirus pandemic.

Some 24 activists were charged for their roles in the Tiananmen vigil last year, during which activists turned up and thousands followed, breaking past barricades in the park to sing songs and light candles despite the police ban on the event.

Infrastructure bill to aid US tribes with water, plumbing

By GILLIAN FLACCUS, FELICIA FONSECA and BECKY BOHRER Associated Press

WARM SPRINGS, Ore. (AP) — Erland Suppah Jr. doesn’t trust what comes out of his faucet.

Each week, Suppah and his girlfriend haul a half-dozen large jugs of water from a distribution center run by the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs to their apartment for everything from drinking to cooking to brushing their teeth for their family of five. It’s the only way they feel safe after countless boil-water notices and weeklong shutoffs on a reservation struggling with bursting pipes, failing pressure valves and a geriatric water treatment plant.

“About the only thing this water is good for is cleaning my floor and flushing down the toilet,” Suppah said of the tap water in the community 100 miles (160 kilometers) southeast of Portland. “That’s it.”

In other, more remote tribal communities across the country, running water and indoor plumbing have never been a reality.

Now, there’s a glimmer of hope in the form of a massive infrastructure bill signed last month that White House officials say represents the largest single infusion of money into Indian Country. It includes \$3.5 billion for the federal Indian Health Service, which provides health care to more than 2 million Native Americans and Alaska Natives, plus pots of money through other federal agencies for water projects.

Tribal leaders say the funding, while welcome, won’t make up for decades of neglect from the U.S. government, which has a responsibility to tribes under treaties and other acts to ensure access to clean water. A list of sanitation deficiencies kept by the Indian Health Service has more than 1,500 projects,

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including wells, septic systems, water storage tanks and pipelines. Some projects would address water contamination from uranium or arsenic.

About 3,300 homes in more than 30 rural Alaska communities lack indoor plumbing, according to a 2020 report. On the Navajo Nation, the largest Native American reservation, about one-third of the 175,000 residents are without running water.

Residents in these places haul water for basic tasks such as washing and cooking, sometimes driving long distances to reach communal water stations. Instead of indoor bathrooms, many use outhouses or lined pails called "honey buckets" that they drag outside to empty. Some shower or do laundry at community sites known as "washeterias," but the equipment can be unreliable and the fees expensive.

"You look at two billionaires competing to fly into outer space, yet we're trying to get basic necessities in villages of interior Alaska," said PJ Simon, a former chairman of an Alaska Native nonprofit corporation called the Tanana Chiefs Conference.

Many more tribal communities have indoor plumbing but woefully inadequate facilities and delivery systems riddled with aging pipes.

The coronavirus pandemic, which disproportionately hit Indian Country, further underscored the stark disparities in access to running water and sewage systems.

In Warm Springs, the water crisis has overlapped with COVID-19.

"During a worldwide pandemic, we've had a boil-water notice. How are we supposed to wash our hands? How are we supposed to sanitize our homes to disinfect, to keep our community members safe? How can we do that ... when our water isn't even clean?" said Dorothea Thurby, who oversees the distribution of free water to tribal members and food boxes to those who are quarantined.

A 2019 report by a pair of nonprofit groups, U.S. Water Alliance and Dig Deep, found Native American homes are 19 times more likely than white households to lack full plumbing. And federal officials note tribal members without indoor toilets or running water are at increased risk of respiratory tract, skin and gastrointestinal infections.

On the Navajo Nation, Eloise Sullivan uses an outhouse and often drives before dawn to beat the crowd at a water-filling station near the Arizona-Utah border to get water for the five people in her household. They use about 850 gallons (3,200 liters) a week, she estimated.

Sullivan, 56, doesn't mind hauling water, but "for the younger generation, it's like, 'Do we have to do that?'"

"It's kind of like a big issue for them," she said.

She once asked local officials what it would cost to run a water line from the closest source about 2 miles (3.2 kilometers) away. She said she was told \$25,000 and never pursued it.

Libby Washburn, special assistant to President Joe Biden on Native American affairs, recently told tribes the infrastructure bill included enough money to complete all the projects on the Indian Health Service list. The agency said it's consulting with tribes and won't make allocation decisions before that process is over.

Until now, tribes and outside organizations have worked to address needs with their own funding, donations or federal money, including pandemic relief.

"If you live without running water, you understand the importance and the connection you have with it, deep down as a person, as a human being," said Burrell Jones, who sets up water systems and delivers water around Dilkon, Arizona, with Dig Deep's Navajo Water Project. "You can't exist without water."

Andrew Marks recently moved back to Tanana, a community of about 190 people in Alaska's interior. He initially relied on a washeteria but found the equipment unreliable. He now has running water and plumbing where he lives but hauls water for family members who don't.

"I believe if we had more people with water, more people connected to the grid, it would drastically improve their life," he said.

In Oregon, tribal officials have handed out about 3 million gallons (11 million liters) of water — almost all of it donated — from a decommissioned elementary school on the reservation. A steady stream of residents pick up a combined 600 gallons (2,270 liters) of water a day from the building. Former classrooms overflow with five-gallon (19-liter) containers and cases of bottled water.

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"The infrastructure bill brought joy to my heart because now it gives me hope — hope that it's going to be repaired," said Dan Martinez, the tribes' emergency manager, who expects to receive federal funds to replace underground pipes and address the 40-year-old treatment plant.

"If you came to work one day and someone said, 'Hey, you need to go and find water for a community of 6,000 people.' ... I mean, where do you start?"

The money won't provide immediate relief. Funding to the Indian Health Service is supposed to be distributed over five years. There is no deadline for its use, and projects will take time to complete once started. The money won't cover operation and maintenance of the systems, a point tribes have criticized.

In Warm Springs, tribal members don't pay for their water, and proposals to charge for it are deeply unpopular. That provides little incentive for tribal members to conserve water and raises questions about how new infrastructure will be maintained.

"There are some Natives who say — and I believe this myself — 'How do you sell something you never owned? The Creator has given it to us,'" said Martinez, a tribal member.

Building out infrastructure in remote areas can be onerous, too. Most roads on the Navajo Nation are unpaved and become muddy and deeply rutted after big storms.

In Alaska, winter temperatures can fall well below zero, and construction seasons are short. Having enough people in a small community who are trained on the specifics of a water system so they can maintain it also can be a challenge, said Kaitlin Mattos, an assistant professor at Fort Lewis College in Colorado who worked on a 2020 report on water infrastructure in Alaska.

"Every bit of funding that is allocated is going to help some family, some household, which is wonderful," she said. "Whether it's enough to help every single household, I think, remains to be seen."

Fonseca reported from Flagstaff, Arizona. Bohrer reported from Juneau, Alaska.

Another danger to illicit drug users: Animal tranquilizer

By LISA RATHKE Associated Press

CHESTER, Vt. (AP) — Brooke Goodwin came home one night last March after being out with friends. She had just turned 23 the day before, had a good job and was planning to go away with friends the following weekend. Her mother, whose bedroom is next door to the kitchen, heard her daughter get some food and go to bed.

But Brooke never came downstairs the next day. Her older sister found her in her room. She had overdosed on a toxic mix of the powerful opioid fentanyl cut with xylazine, an animal sedative that is making its way into the illicit drug supply, particularly in the Northeast.

Her death has "just ripped us to shreds," said her mother, Deb Walker, who has four other children.

"I didn't even know Brooke was using drugs. I know absolutely she did not know that that was in there," she said.

According to a report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention this autumn, xylazine was involved in fatal drug overdoses in 23 states in 2019, with the highest rate — 67% — happening in the Northeast. The animal sedative used in veterinary medicine to sedate cows, horses, sheep and other animals is being added to other drugs, mostly fentanyl and heroin, as a cutting agent, officials said.

But unlike opioids, there's no antidote like naloxone, also called Narcan, specific to a xylazine overdose.

The animal tranquilizer is also not a controlled substance and not approved for human use. When used in illicitly produced opioids, xylazine may increase the risk for fatal overdose, the CDC warns.

"If somebody's overdosing on xylazine or on heroin cut with xylazine, that naloxone is not going to have much of an effect on the part of the overdose that's driven by the xylazine," said Dr. Scott Hadland, an addiction doctor and chief of adolescent and young adult medicine at the MassGeneral Hospital for Children in Boston.

Supportive measures can be used if a person is attended to early enough, such as resuscitation, getting them fluids and other sorts of hospital care, Hadland said. "But this is much more difficult to manage

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out in the community because it's inevitably going to be an overdose that involves multiple substances including opioids," he said.

While the rate of overdose deaths where xylazine was listed as a cause of death was low at 1.2%, the report states that the animal tranquilizer's detection may be underestimated. That's because routine post-death toxicology tests "might not have included tests for xylazine, and current testing protocols for xylazine are not standard."

"It has been going on for a time but there's also a lot of indications from local authorities that the problem is worsening, particularly here in the Northeast," said Hadland.

One or more other drugs were also listed as the cause of the overdose deaths, including heroin and cocaine, with fentanyl being the most common, according to the CDC report.

"Fentanyl we know to be in the drug supply. We know it's in the heroin supply, so often when you think you're buying heroin, you're in fact getting fentanyl. I think that's what's happening with xylazine," Hadland said. "You think you're getting heroin and you're getting something that's cut with xylazine."

Nationally, overdose deaths have been rising for the more than two decades but surged 30% in the latest year. Health officials say the jump is tied to the COVID-19 pandemic and a more dangerous drug supply.

In the small rural state of Vermont, the number of fatal overdoses involving xylazine combined with opioids tripled from five in 2020 to 15 in the first seven months of this year, according to a report from the Vermont Department of Health.

Lt. Casey Daniell, commander of the Vermont State Police drug unit, said it's common to see xylazine in the test results for the drugs that police are purchasing undercover.

"I think the biggest issue is the fact that it's not a controlled substance, so there's no regulation on it," he said. "It's no different than aspirin," so people cannot be charged for distributing it.

Walker says her daughter was poisoned.

Drugs and addiction had come up many times in their conversations, Walker said, because Goodwin was helping friends who were using.

"She was trying to help them out. She did everything she could to try and help them get clean and they pulled her down," Walker said while visiting Goodwin's grave earlier this month.

The more information that gets out there about xylazine, the better, she said.

"There are so many people that would like to not be (using) that haven't been able to beat it. Those might be the people that would actually hear this and understand this and it might help and that would be super," Walker said.

Brooke not only lived with her mother but worked with her at Precision Valley Communications, a mapping, engineering and design corporation for the telecommunications and utility industries, where she was a CAD operator.

"All my coworkers just thought she was wonderful and everyone was just so shocked. There was no clue. She was not an addict; however, she was using."

Brooke died on March 14, 2021, two days after her birthday and a day before her mother's. She "enjoyed her dog, photography, road trips and investigating the supernatural," according to her obituary.

She was buried the day before Halloween, her favorite holiday, and people who attended were encouraged to dress up. Now her 9-year-old sisters, who are twins, are asking their mother if the family will get Brooke a Christmas present.

Her friend, Haley Decelle, says Brooke was "kind, calm and level-headed" and the pair had gone on frequent road trips and had matching tattoos. Decelle is pregnant now.

"It sucks because we always talked about doing all this stuff together when one of us got pregnant," she said. "And now I don't get to do it."

Bustling bars, surging business: Dubai sees a post-vax boom

By ISABEL DEBRE Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Nations around the world are lurching into lockdown, stealing

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themselves for a brutal surge as the omicron variant spreads like wildfire.

But in Dubai, Donna Sese is bracing for a very different surge: countless restaurant bookings and meter-long drink bills.

"We're back and busy like the way things used to be," said Sese, manager of the Yalumba restaurant at the five-star Le Meridien hotel, where devotees of Dubai's Friday brunch pay \$250 for lavish spreads with free-flowing Clicquot Champagne.

The globalized city-state appears to be in the midst of a boom season, spurred on by one of the world's highest vaccination rates and government steps to lure businesses and de-escalate tensions with regional rivals.

Maskless debauchery has returned to dance floors. Brunch-goers are drinking with abandon. Home-buyers are flooding the market. Tourists are snapping up hotel suites. Expat millionaires are moving to the emirate. Coronavirus infections, although now making a comeback, remain below past peaks.

The Dubai government did not respond to request for comment.

It's déjà vu for those recalling the rush of December last year in Dubai, when the city courted tourists and influencers fleeing virus lockdowns and wintry weather. The open-door policy let revelers sate their pent-up desire to go out on New Year's Eve but infections soon rocketed to unseen heights, and hospitals filled up.

A year later, mass vaccination has left Dubai feeling like it's off the hook. There have been vanishingly few virus hospitalizations and deaths — even as the threat of omicron looms and daily infections surged over 660 on Wednesday after lows of under 100 for weeks.

While many Western countries have seen inoculation rates plateau, the UAE reports 99% of all of those eligible for vaccines — anyone over 12 — has received at least one dose.

Some have received five.

In the global vaccine scramble, the UAE relied on a shot made by Sinopharm, a state-backed Chinese company. Even as the nation's vaccination rate soared this spring, infections rose — as did concerns over Sinopharm's insufficient antibody response.

Now, Sinopharm is no longer an option in Dubai. Those who received both doses, including the emirate's legions of low-paid foreign laborers, also have opted for double vaccination with Pfizer-BioNTech. The government offers Pfizer boosters to all adults.

Months of trepidation have given way to unburdened excitement. Encouraged by widespread inoculation and record-low mortgage rates, more properties were sold in Dubai in November than in any other month in the last eight years, according to website Property Finder.

Sales prices have surged past pre-pandemic levels. Until June, prices were climbing 2.5% month on month, with wild appreciations in the luxury segment.

Market analysts have attributed the hot streak to a pause in villa construction and influx of Western European, Chinese and Indian financiers drawn to glittery Dubai's open offices, high vaccination and low tax rates.

A giant cryptocurrency conference in October drew dozens of young millionaires who paid cash upfront for beach villas, real estate agents said.

"You can go to restaurants. There's no debate about remote working. This is not the case in Europe where it's still locking down," said Christophe De Rassenfosse, the chief product officer of Property Finder, about why he moved his family from Brussels to Dubai in October. "You don't necessarily have a huge percentage of elderly people which occupies the hospitals."

The government has promoted plans to make the sheikhdom more attractive to foreign investors and visitors, with new 10-year visas, retirement and freelance options and reforms to the country's Islamic legal code.

In its latest move as competition heats up with neighboring Saudi Arabia, the UAE will change its work week from Sunday-Thursday to Monday-Friday to align with the West.

The rebound is apparent in the city's full hotels, clogged roads and raucous nightclubs.

Hotel occupancy in Dubai exceeded 90% in mid-November, according to data firm STR. Long-haul car-

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rier Emirates estimated over 1.1 million passengers would squeeze through its Dubai terminal ahead of the holidays.

Traffic during the first week of December surpassed 2019 levels, according to navigation company TomTom. Taxis have been missing from many street corners, with fleet owners that downsized operations during the pandemic citing shortages amid "unprecedented" demand.

Overall sales of alcohol by volume in the UAE rose to 117.5 million liters (31 million gallons) this year, up some 7.8% sold the year before, according to market research firm Euromonitor.

The growth has even extended to business with the UAE's long-time rivals — Turkey and Iran.

Politics had poisoned trade between the powerhouses in past years. But in a recent flurry of diplomacy across the Middle East, UAE's de facto leader met Turkey's president in Ankara, and a top Emirati national security advisor visited Tehran.

From March to September 2021, Iran's imports from the UAE spiked 70% to \$5.4 billion, according to Iranian government figures. Emirati imports will hit levels unseen since America imposed crushing sanctions on Iran in 2018 by the year's end.

Trade between the UAE and Turkey also jumped over 100% to \$7.2 billion during the first half of this year, reported the official Emirati WAM news agency.

Iranian and Turkish business leaders in Dubai say the detente has eased restrictions on their licenses and visas.

Turkish business expert Fatma Nilgun Emrem of Tamimi Consulting has been inundated with requests from Turkish beauty salons, retailers and restaurants seeking to set up shop in Dubai.

"The policies and perspectives of the UAE are changing," she said.

Hossein Asrar Haghghi, board member of the Iran-UAE Business Council, similarly described "a relaxing" of trade regulations on Iranians and growing number of Iranian businessmen who secured the UAE's 10-year golden visas.

"The combination of Dubai getting out of COVID, reduction of regional tensions and new moves to attract businesses, it's a pretty good environment," said Gregory Gause, a scholar of the region at Texas A&M University. "But Dubai doesn't control what goes on around it."

A collapse of ongoing talks in Vienna to revive Tehran's nuclear deal may inflame Mideast tensions. When the world's fair packs up and leaves Dubai next year, industries may suffer from overcapacity, warned James Swanston, an economist at Capital Economics.

And the rapid spread of omicron may soon spoil Dubai's party.

But for now, optimism reigns.

"The money has returned," said Saeed Zakari, a captain at Dubai's creek who plies the Persian Gulf in a dhow packed with appliances bound for Iran.

Associated Press writer Amir Vahdat in Tehran, Iran contributed to this report.

US delays intelligence center targeting foreign influence

By NOMAAN MERCHANT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — As Russia was working to subvert U.S. elections and sow discord among Americans, Congress directed the creation of an intelligence center to lead efforts to stop interference by foreign adversaries. But two years later, that center still is not close to opening.

Experts and intelligence officials broadly agree the proposed Foreign Malign Influence Center is a good idea. The U.S. has lacked a cohesive strategy to fight influence operations, they say, with not enough coordination among national security agencies. Adversaries that tried to interfere in the last two presidential elections continue to bombard Americans with disinformation and conspiracy theories at a time of peril for democracy in the U.S. and around the world.

But the intelligence community and Congress remain divided over the center's mission, budget and size, according to current and former officials. While separate efforts to counter interference continue, a person

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identified this year as a potential director has since been assigned elsewhere and the center likely will not open anytime soon.

"It really is just giving a gift to Russia and China and others who clearly have their sights set not only on the midterm elections but on ongoing campaigns to destabilize American society," said David Salvo, deputy director of the Alliance for Securing Democracy and a senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund.

The nation's top intelligence official had advocated for the center before taking office. Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines last year co-chaired a German Marshall Fund task force supporting it. In a statement, spokeswoman Nicole de Haay said the director's office "is focused on creating a center to facilitate and integrate the Intelligence Community's efforts to address foreign malign influence."

But some lawmakers are concerned about further expanding the mission of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. ODNI was originally envisioned as a small coordinating body to address the intelligence-sharing failures preceding the Sept. 11 attacks. It has several centers that critics say are well-meaning attempts to solve problems but end up causing unnecessary duplication.

Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Mark Warner said that while he supports the center, there were "legitimate questions about how large such an organization should be and even about where it would fit" with existing government efforts to fight foreign interference.

"We want to be sure that this center enhances those efforts rather than duplicating them or mirroring them in unnecessary bureaucracy," the Virginia Democrat said in a statement. "I don't have any real doubt that we will ultimately stand the center up in the relatively near future, but we need to be sure we get it right."

It's unclear who would lead the center. Separately, there is also a vacancy for a new election threats executive after the previous executive, Shelby Pierson, ended her term and returned to another intelligence post. Pierson had been in the spotlight last year after giving lawmakers a closed-door briefing on Russia's efforts to intervene in the 2020 election in favor of President Donald Trump. That angered Trump, who berated the then-director of national intelligence and later replaced him. Trump has promoted falsehoods about elections and pushed Republicans to follow his lead.

Experts on democracy have long warned that what the government refers to as "malign influence" is a national security threat. Social media has helped make disinformation a cheap and powerful tactic for adversaries who can push false or altered stories, videos and images, and amplify falsehoods already circulating among Americans to promote their own interests and create chaos.

U.S. and other Western authorities have accused Russia of spreading disinformation about the coronavirus and vaccines, stealing data from local and state election servers, and pushing false stories intended to exploit divisions over race and civil rights. Intelligence agencies have found that Russia used influence operations to interfere with the 2016 presidential election in favor of Trump's campaign and conducted operations in Trump's favor in 2020.

The U.S. assessed China ultimately did not interfere in the 2020 election, but Beijing has been accused of promoting false theories about the COVID-19 pandemic and trying to sway businesses and all levels of government. Iran was accused of sponsoring emails intended to intimidate Democratic-leaning voters into supporting Trump.

Experts say the new center can warn Americans about interference and produce better information for policymakers. While the FBI, the National Security Agency and several other government agencies have long worked on foreign interference, "we are not organized in a way where we are building a coherent threat picture," said Jessica Brandt, an expert on foreign interference and disinformation at the Brookings Institution.

But there are risks in the intelligence community ramping up its monitoring of what Americans see and read. The FBI and NSA have been accused of unlawfully spying on Americans. That history contributes to many Americans' distrust of the intelligence community, as do Trump's attacks on intelligence professionals and what he has derided as the "deep state."

Opponents note the U.S. also has a history of covert interference in other countries and has helped overthrow governments seen as anti-American. A column published by the Kremlin-backed RT.com alleged the proposed center "is just official cover for American intelligence interference in domestic politics."

The intelligence community also risks being seen as political or infringing on First Amendment rights if it takes the same untruths spread by Americans and labels them as foreign interference when they're spread by an adversary.

The center "is going to have to figure out this enormous challenge to convey threats to American elections, American democracy, at a time when there seem to be two completely different realities," said Salvo of the German Marshall Fund.

Congress authorized the center in late 2019 and directed ODNI to create it. Several people who worked in intelligence matters at that time, speaking on condition of anonymity to describe confidential discussions, say they didn't know of any effort by the Trump White House to stop the center. Instead, leaders within ODNI disagreed on how to structure the new center or whether it should be a "virtual center" without an office.

According to one of the people, William Evanina, the former chief of ODNI's counterintelligence center, offered to take the malign influence center under his authority, but the office ultimately did not choose that option. Evanina declined to comment.

After Biden took office, ODNI presented a plan for a small center with a few dozen staff members to the intelligence and appropriations committees in the House and Senate. But even as Congress required the center's creation, key lawmakers from both parties have expressed concerns about the plan.

A proposal to fund the center this summer failed and it is unlikely to be completed while the government is operating with temporary funding. The center may now be included if a full spending plan is approved in early 2022.

Suzanne Spaulding, an election security expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, called for the U.S. government to act quickly.

"Time is not on our side," Spaulding said. "Disinformation is a national security threat and should be treated with the urgency that a national security threat engenders."

Is the COVID-19 vaccine safe for children?

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

Is the COVID-19 vaccine safe for children?

Yes, U.S. regulators authorized Pfizer's vaccine for younger children after millions of 12- to 17-year-olds already safely got the shot, the only one available for children in the country.

More than 5 million children ages 5 to 11 have gotten a first dose since early November, and government safety monitoring has not uncovered any surprise problems.

This age group gets kid-size doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, a third of the amount used to vaccinate everyone 12 or older. The Food and Drug Administration cleared the shots based on a study showing the kid-size doses were 91% effective at preventing symptomatic COVID-19. The 5- to 11-year-olds developed virus-fighting antibodies as strong as those of teens and young adults who got regular doses, with similar or fewer annoying reactions such as sore arms, fever or achiness.

The FDA assessed the safety of the kid-size doses in 3,100 vaccinated youngsters. Regulators deemed that enough data, considering the trove of safety information from hundreds of millions of larger doses given to adults and teens worldwide.

Very rarely, teens and young adults given the Pfizer vaccine or a similar one made by Moderna experience a serious side effect, heart inflammation, or what doctors call myocarditis. It's mostly in young men or teen boys, and usually after the second dose. They tend to recover quickly, and after intense scrutiny U.S. health authorities concluded the vaccine's benefits outweigh that small risk.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is looking into a handful of reports of heart inflammation, mostly mild and brief, among 5- to 11-year-olds since vaccinations of that age group began.

To put the risk in context, COVID-19 also causes heart inflammation, often a more severe kind, said Dr. Matthew Oster, a pediatric cardiologist at Emory University. It also sometimes occurs in children who get a multisystem inflammatory syndrome after a coronavirus infection.

Before the pandemic, doctors regularly diagnosed heart inflammation caused by bacterial or viral infec-

tions or medications, again mostly in teen boys and young men. Oster said one theory is that testosterone and puberty play a role, which is partly why many experts expect any vaccine-related risk would be lower for younger kids getting a smaller dose.

The AP is answering your questions about the coronavirus in this series. Submit them at: FactCheck@AP.org. Read more here:

Can your pet get COVID-19?

How will the world decide when the pandemic is over?

How can I protect myself from the new omicron variant?

High court to hold special session on vaccine requirements

By JESSICA GRESKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court says it will hold a special session in just over two weeks to weigh challenges to two Biden administration policies covering vaccine requirements for millions of workers, policies that affect large employers and health care workers.

The high court's announcement Wednesday that it will hear arguments in the cases Jan. 7 comes amid rising coronavirus cases and is an extraordinarily fast timeline. The court had not been scheduled to hear cases again until Jan. 10.

A three-judge panel of the 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Cincinnati ruled 2-1 on Friday that the vaccine or testing regime for workers at larger companies could take effect. The plan requires workers at larger companies to be vaccinated or wear face masks and get tested weekly. The requirement could affect some 84 million U.S. workers.

Republican-led states, conservative organizations and businesses had challenged the requirement after the Occupational Safety and Health Administration published the rule in early November. The rule was to go into effect Jan. 4.

The high court also will hear arguments over a rule published Nov. 5 by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid that applies to a wide range of health care providers that receive federal Medicare or Medicaid funding. It requires their workers to receive the first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine by Dec. 6 and be fully vaccinated by Jan. 4. It was projected to affect more than 17 million workers in about 76,000 health care facilities as well as home health care providers.

Decisions by the New Orleans-based 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals and St. Louis-based 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals as well as a federal judge in Texas have the mandate blocked in about half of states.

In a statement Wednesday evening after the court announced it would hear arguments, the White House defended its policies and said that especially with the rise of the coronavirus' omicron variant, "it is critical to protect workers with vaccination requirements and testing protocols that are urgently needed."

"We are confident in the legal authority for both policies and (the Justice Department) will vigorously defend both at the Supreme Court," the statement said.

The high court's decision to quickly hold arguments on the requirements was unusual. Both issues arrived at the court on an emergency basis, and the court usually quickly decides emergency applications without the more typical full briefing and oral argument.

But the court has also been criticized recently for how it handles the process, which has been called the court's "shadow docket." Justice Samuel Alito pushed back in September against that criticism, saying it was unwarranted.

The Supreme Court announced earlier this year that all the justices have been vaccinated. Because of the coronavirus, however, the court is not open to the public. Lawyers arguing cases must test negative COVID-19 and journalists observing arguments must also have a negative test.

Also brewing in lower courts are challenges to the Biden administration's requirement that federal contractors receive COVID-19 vaccinations.

A village in India's northeast mourns after deadly attacks

By YIRMIYAN ARTHUR Associated Press

OTING, India (AP) — It was 2004 when a bear mauled Nenwang Konyak in the forest in Mon district, high up in the hills along India's border with Myanmar. The men in his village, Oting, rescued him and carried him home. He survived, thanks to them, but was left with a jagged scar running down his face.

When Nenwang heard that his village had called for a search team earlier this month to look for a group of laborers who were missing, he didn't hesitate. He and his 23-year-old twin brothers joined them on Dec. 4, not knowing that the laborers had already been killed by Indian soldiers. Later that day, seven men in the search party were killed by the soldiers — and Nenwang returned home without his twin brothers.

Like others in the village, he is haunted by the events of Dec. 4 and 5, when 14 civilians and a soldier were killed in a series of attacks in the northeastern state of Nagaland. Twelve of men, most of them coal miners, were from Oting village. The violence, among the deadliest to hit the state in recent years, sparked national anger and headlines — and left Oting reeling with shock and grief.

"Even Christmas will bring no joy. Our hearts are hurting. They were our own children," said Among, a 50-year-old Christian woman in the village.

This part of India is long accustomed to pain. The people here are Nagas, a minority group more ethnically tied to Myanmar and China than to India. Over 90% of the state's more than 1.9 million people are Christian -- a striking contrast in a Hindu-majority country. For decades, Nagas have fought a battle for independence from India, and there are few families that have not suffered from the violence.

In recent years, the violence has ebbed but the demands for political rights have grown even as the federal government has pushed for talks with separatists. Peace negotiations began in 1997 after the Indian government signed a cease-fire agreement with the Isak-Muivah faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland.

In Oting, many work as farmers, except for during the lean season from November to March as the rains subside. During that time, they labor in open-pit coal mines. It is a backbreaking work. The money earned is often used to pay for school for their children, but when December comes, it's all about Christmas.

On Saturday, Dec. 4, Shomwang, a villager, set off from Oting with food to give to the people working in his coal mine. On his way back home, he was joined by seven miners on his truck who wanted to be back in the village for the Sunday church service.

Their vehicle had barely left the mine when it was ambushed by Indian soldiers. Bullets began raining down, killing Shomwang and five others. Two remain hospitalized.

Back in Oting, the villagers heard the shooting but dismissed it as a gunfight between soldiers and Naga fighters or between rival Naga factions. But when night fell and no one had seen the laborers, a search party set out. Soon, they found the truck, empty and bullet-ridden. Barely 50 meters (150 feet) away, they saw soldiers on four trucks, one of them carrying the dead bodies of their brothers, sons and friends piled like animal carcasses on top of one another.

Enraged, they set three military vehicles on fire. The soldiers retaliated by shooting not just at the crowd, but also at stalls and shops about a kilometer (half a mile) away. By the time the last bullet was fired, 13 civilians in total and one soldier had been killed. Several were injured.

The violence continued the next day, when protesters attacked an army camp, prompting soldiers to shoot, killing one more civilian.

The army said the soldiers acted on the basis of "credible intelligence" that some of the victims were militants, but expressed regret and called it a case of "mistaken identity." The government said it will launch an investigation. But villagers have rejected it, demanding an independent probe. They have also refused compensation offered by the government.

"I was helping others unload the bodies from the truck when the soldiers started firing. I ran for my life and took refuge inside an earthmover. Two people hiding with me got killed. When the soldiers started shooting in our direction, I ran," said Phonai, a coal miner and part of the search team who survived.

Nearly three weeks later, Shomwang's truck, marked with bullet holes and cordoned off by crime scene

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tape, still stands at the site of the attack as a reminder. A stench, foul and overpowering, hangs in the air.

The incident struck a chord, drawing hundreds of people to Oting. Officials came to investigate, others came simply to offer support and share their grief.

"The pain is unbearable," said Naophe Wangcha, the mother of the village chief. "We just want news that the guilty have got what they deserve."

Cries of anger have spilled beyond Oting, swelling in towns and cities across Nagaland. Since the deaths, candlelight vigils and solidarity marches have called for the revocation of the Armed Forces Special (Powers) Act, which has loomed over the region since 1958 and gives many areas the feel of an occupied territory. The act gives the military sweeping powers to search, arrest and even shoot suspects with little fear of prosecution. Nagas and human rights groups have long accused security forces of abusing the law.

On a recent Thursday, in a tiny wooden house with mud floors, an 18-year-old, Mary Wangshu, was mourning her brother.

Manpeih was the family's only son and was pampered at home. The siblings worked in the coal mines, and were the only ones living in the family house with their parents. "I miss him," she said. "He was my only companion at home after everyone moved away."

Outside, her mother, Awat, was surrounded by neighbors who tried to distract her — once, she even tried to laugh.

Grief is shared here, even if villagers process loss in their own way. Some silently weep in their kitchens, some angrily call for justice, some share stories, some seek solace in the church. Yet they're all interconnected, and have been, for generations. There are friendships and marriages and lifetimes that link the people here.

"Humans are not harvested from the ground. They aren't grown wild. They come from our wombs. We care for them for nine months with physical pain, we keep them safe from mosquito bites, we give them food meant for ourselves, we send them to school with hope for their future. And then to have them killed has brought us much grief," Among said. "We will visit their graves on Christmas morning and speak with them. We will ask their spirits to visit us."

At dusk a few days after the killings, Shomwang's younger brother is sitting with Nenwang and his parents around the fireplace. Both families have suffered loss but have also found solace in each other.

"It is too painful. I don't want to talk about it," Nenwang said softly.

Potter jury to return Thursday for 4th day of deliberations

By AMY FORLITI and SCOTT BAUER Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — The jury at the trial of a suburban Minneapolis police officer who shot and killed Black motorist Daunte Wright was to return Thursday for a fourth day of deliberations as the Christmas holiday loomed.

The jury weighing Kim Potter's fate got the case Monday following closing arguments and has deliberated for about 23 hours.

Potter, who is white, said she meant to use her Taser on Wright rather than her gun. She is charged with first- and second-degree manslaughter. If convicted of the most serious charge, Potter, 49, would face a sentence of about seven years under state guidelines, though prosecutors have said they will seek more.

The judge has ordered that the mostly white jury be sequestered during deliberations — meaning jurors remain under the court's supervision in an undisclosed hotel and cannot return home until they have reached a verdict or the judge has determined they can't reach one.

However, Chu told jurors at the start of the trial that they would have time off on Christmas Eve and over the Christmas weekend. She has not indicated that she would change that plan if deliberations were ongoing.

"I think the holiday will put pressure on them to agree," Joe Friedberg, a Minneapolis defense attorney who is not involved in the case but is following it, said Wednesday.

Jurors gave a hint Tuesday of difficulty reaching agreement, when they asked Chu what to do if they

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could not agree. She sent them back to keep trying. The court reported no questions from the jury on Wednesday.

During closing arguments, prosecutors accused Potter of a “blunder of epic proportions” in Wright’s death in an April 11 traffic stop — but said a mistake was no defense.

Potter’s attorneys countered that Wright, who was attempting to get away from officers as they sought to handcuff him for an outstanding warrant on a weapons charge, created the conditions that led to his own death.

Wright’s death set off angry protests in Brooklyn Center just as nearby Minneapolis was on edge over Derek Chauvin’s trial in George Floyd’s death.

Potter, who resigned two days after Wright’s death, testified Friday that she “didn’t want to hurt anybody” and that she was “sorry it happened.”

Chu told jurors that the state doesn’t have to prove Potter tried to kill Wright.

The judge said for first-degree manslaughter, prosecutors must prove that Potter caused Wright’s death while committing the crime of reckless handling of a firearm. This means they must prove that she committed a conscious or intentional act while handling or using a firearm that creates a substantial or unjustifiable risk that she was aware of and disregarded, and that she endangered safety.

For second-degree manslaughter, prosecutors must prove she acted with culpable negligence, meaning she consciously took a chance of causing death or great bodily harm.

Bauer reported from Madison, Wisconsin. Associated Press writer Kathleen Foody in Chicago contributed to this story.

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

Chile’s tattooed president-elect honors homeland in ink

By PATRICIA LUNA Associated Press

SANTIAGO, Chile (AP) — When Gabriel Boric is sworn in as Chile’s president he’ll not only be the youngest to lead the South American country but also the first in Latin America to sport several tattoos.

The question is whether he’ll openly display them.

One person hoping he does is Yumbel Góngora, the self-proclaimed “tattoo dissident” who inked the three elaborate designs that fill Boric’s arms and back with sweeping imagery from his native Patagonia region.

“It’s important that a person never forgets their roots. That always keeps you focused on where you are and what’s important ... not get lost in the fame,” Góngora told The Associated Press while taking a break at her parlor in downtown Santiago decorated with artwork containing feminist slogans.

Boric, 35, scored a historic victory in Sunday’s runoff over a one-time admirer of Donald Trump after campaigning on a promise to attack the nagging poverty and inequality that he and leftist supporters argue is the unacceptable underbelly of a free market model imposed decades ago by the dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet.

Since his days as a student protest leader, Boric has made a career of flouting conventions. He shunned the traditional suit and tie when he was elected to congress in 2014 and instead wore rock band T-shirts, jeans and once even a Mohawk, all the while drawing the ire of traditionalists.

“I couldn’t care less,” he said at the time, dismissing the conventions as “a tool of the elites to distinguish themselves from the low people.”

But he adopted a decidedly more conformist look in the run up to Sunday’s runoff election — still no tie, but a dark sport coat, dress shirts and well-groomed beard — to court more conservative Chileans on edge about voting for an untested millennial who counts among his supporters Chile’s Communist Party.

Góngora said she studied old maps of Chile for months in coming up with the first tattoo she designed for Boric nearly a decade ago: a map of the ice-capped islands and labyrinthine fjords near where both grew up in Punta Arenas, at the tip of the South American continent.

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Later, she designed two more: a lenga tree twisted into knots by the strong southern winds and an end-of-world lighthouse shining into emptiness that Boric had carved into his left arm during a battle with depression.

"A lonely Magellan lighthouse among the stormy and mysterious seas of southern Patagonia," Boric said in a 2018 social media post showcasing Góngora's body art. "I'm going to live there one day but in the meantime it lives with me."

Góngora, whose dyed green hair, piercings and tattoos are something of a walking advertisement for her university-trained artistry, said Boric always stood out among her urban hipster clientele because of his humility — something she attributes to his upbringing far from the capital.

But she felt betrayed by her fellow activist when in November 2019 he negotiated a deal with allies of President Sebastian Pinera to put an end to nationwide protests in exchange for a commitment to hold a plebiscite on rewriting the Pinochet-era constitution. It was a risky political decision that at the time cost Boric the support of hardliners like Góngora, who identifies as a "anarchist-feminist."

Like huge numbers of often apathetic Chilean youth, she nonetheless voted for Boric in the runoff, fearing his conservative opponent — José Antonio Kast — would be a major setback for women, indigenous rights and Chile's LGBTQ community.

In her binder sits the sketch for yet another tattoo for Boric — its design a secret — that the two discussed a while ago. With the demands of his new job and the future of Chile riding on his shoulders, she doesn't know if she get to ink it, though.

"I'd hope he doesn't stop being a rocker," Góngora said. "But I don't know if that will fly in politics. Then again, nobody ever expected such a young president."

Associated Press writer Joshua Goodman in Miami contributed to this report.

'Chitty Chitty Bang Bang' actor Sally Ann Howes dies at 91

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Sally Ann Howes, who played as a child actor before she later starred in the 1968 film "Chitty Chitty Bang Bang" with Dick Van Dyke, has died. She was 91.

Her son Andrew Hart Adler confirmed his mother's death in an interview with the Press Association on Wednesday. Her nephew, Toby Howes, said on Twitter that the family hoped Howes could "hold on" until the Christmas screening of "Chitty Chitty Bang Bang," but he said she ultimately died peacefully in her sleep.

The cause of Howes' death has not been released.

The New York Times reported she died in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida, on Sunday.

Howes, an English actor, began her career on the big screen at the age of 12 in the 1943 film "Thursday's Child," where she played a schoolgirl turned successful actor. She comes from an acting lineage that includes her parents, Bobby Howes and Patricia Malone.

In five decades, Howes made appearances in more than 140 films, musicals, plays and television projects including the screen adaption of Charles Dickens' "Nicholas Nickleby" and "The History of Mr. Polly." She made her biggest splash as the character Truly Scrumptious in "Chitty Chitty Bang Bang," which became a holiday favorite.

"Chitty Chitty Bang Bang" was often broadcasted on Christmas Day in the United Kingdom.

Howes made a mark in the theater realm. She earned a Tony Award nomination for her performance in "Brigadoon" at the New York City Opera in 1962. The later part of her career was spent in theater. She made her last appearance on screen in the limited series "Secrets" in 1992.

China orders lockdown of up to 13 million people in Xi'an

BEIJING (AP) — China ordered the lockdown of as many as 13 million people in neighborhoods and workplaces in the northern city of Xi'an following a spike in coronavirus cases, setting off panic buying just weeks before the country hosts the Winter Olympic Games.

State media reported that city officials ordered all residents to stay home unless they had a pressing

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reason to go out and suspended all transport to and from the city apart from special cases.

One person from each household will be permitted out every two days to buy household necessities, the order said. It took effect at midnight Wednesday, with no word on when it might be lifted.

There was no word on whether the virus was the newly surging omicron variant or the far more common delta. China has recorded just seven omicron cases — four in the southern manufacturing center of Guangzhou, two in the southern city of Changsha and one in the northern port of Tianjin.

Social media posts recorded panic buying of groceries and household products, with the government saying new supplies would be brought in. Residents posting on Thursday however, said the situation remained relatively calm, with people allowed to travel in and out of the compounds in which they live.

Xi'an on Thursday reported another 63 locally transmitted cases over the previous 24 hours, pushing the city's total to at least 211 over the past week. Xi'an is the capital of Shaanxi province, famed for its imperial relics, as well as a major center of industry.

China has also been dealing with a substantial outbreak in several cities in the eastern province of Zhejiang near Shanghai, although isolation measures there have been more narrowly targeted.

China has adopted strict pandemic control measures under its policy of seeking to drive new transmissions to zero, leading to frequent lockdowns, universal masking and mass testing. While the policy has not been entirely successful while leading to massive disruptions in travel and trade, Beijing credits it with largely containing the spread of the virus.

Those measures have been stepped up in recent days ahead of the start of the Beijing Winter Olympic Games on Feb. 4.

The Xi'an restrictions are some of the harshest since China in 2020 imposed a strict lockdown on more than 11 million people in and around the central city of Wuhan, after the coronavirus was first detected there in late 2019.

China has reported 4,636 deaths among a total of 100,644 cases of COVID-19.

Biden tries COVID cajoling, avoids new decrees that divide

By RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden's message to the American people on confronting omicron comes with a heavy dose of cajoling, while some other countries are issuing edicts to their citizens as the new coronavirus variant takes over with breathtaking speed.

America's polarized reaction to vaccines and masks, and its system of government in which states have broad authority over health matters, limit some of the options Biden can exercise — at least without igniting political flareups that could distract from the urgency of his message.

"What we have learned is politics matters," said Jen Kates, who directs global health work for the non-partisan Kaiser Family Foundation. "You would have expected us to weather the storm, and we haven't."

"We are a big country, we are a complex country, and on every issue partisans are divided," she said. "That, coupled with local control, and we end up with a disjointed response."

In France, Prime Minister Jean Castex has banned public concerts and fireworks displays at New Year's celebrations while calling on people to avoid large gatherings and limit the number of family members coming together for Christmas.

In Canada, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's federal government is advising citizens not to travel, backing that with a stiff warning that if they test positive abroad they won't be able to get on a flight to return, and could be stranded.

In Germany, Chancellor Olaf Scholz and state governors agreed on restrictions to take effect before the new year, including limiting private gatherings to 10 people, closing nightclubs nationwide and holding large events like soccer matches without in-person audiences.

In the U.S., Biden has not issued fresh travel warnings nor urged the cancellation of public events. He stands by his workplace vaccine mandate, which is caught up in litigation. But he has held back from actions such as a vaccination requirement for air travel, which some public health experts have called for.

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Speaking at the White House on Tuesday, the president seemed to be taking pains to try to connect with viewers on TV. He avoided a catchphrase that he and other members of his administration have often used — “pandemic of the unvaccinated” — and instead tried to appeal to vaccine refusers as fellow Americans.

“I, honest to God, believe it’s your patriotic duty,” Biden said, urging the unvaccinated to get their shots.

He even invoked his Republican predecessor. “Just the other day, former President (Donald) Trump announced he had gotten his booster shot,” Biden said. “It may be one of the few things he and I agree on.”

To vaccinated Americans, the president’s message was a flashing yellow light to use caution and common sense as they go ahead with their holiday plans. To the unvaccinated, it was meant as a flashing red light to pause, take a good look, and reconsider their stance.

“You have an obligation to yourselves, to your family,” said Biden.

“Get vaccinated now,” he pleaded. “It’s free. It’s convenient. I promise you, it saves lives.”

But it’s unclear what, if anything, will persuade some 40 million U.S. adults who remain unvaccinated.

A Kaiser foundation poll out this week found that only about 1 in 8 unvaccinated adults said the emergence of omicron has made them more likely to get a shot.

Earlier Kaiser polling highlighted the partisan and ideological splits. A survey last month found that 55% of unvaccinated adults are Republicans or lean to the GOP. That’s compared to 16% for the Democrats.

A quarter of all Republicans say they will definitely not get a shot, compared to just 2% of Democrats who say the same.

The U.S. under COVID is like two nations, said Dr. Peter Hotez, dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. He’s not sure Biden’s message will connect with vaccine refusers.

About two-thirds of Americans understand that vaccines can help them, Hotez said, but about one-fourth to one-third “are living under a rock.”

While the White House is trying reach all Americans, “it comes out as very simplistic,” said Hotez.

And Biden’s task of messaging is not going to get any less complicated.

As omicron spreads, more vaccinated people are going to become infected because two shots alone do not appear to offer enough protection against getting sick. Even if vaccinated people avoid hospitalization, as the data indicate they generally can, a case of COVID disrupts family life and work routines.

“Because omicron spreads so easily, we’ll see some fully vaccinated people get COVID, potentially in large numbers,” Biden acknowledged. “There will be positive cases in every office, even here in the White House ... among the vaccinated.”

Yet his administration has not changed the definition of “fully vaccinated” from two shots of the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines to three, as some public health experts have urged. With Johnson & Johnson’s single dose vaccine, a booster is also recommended.

The sense of unease among the vaccinated majority of Americans is underscored by news reports of well-known people such as Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., contracting COVID though fully vaccinated and boosted.

And Wednesday night, Rep. Jim Clyburn, D-S.C., a close ally of Biden, announced he has tested positive with a breakthrough infection but has no symptoms. Still, his brush with COVID-19 meant he had to miss his granddaughter’s wedding.

“America is in a new phase of this pandemic,” Clyburn, who is fully vaccinated and boosted, said in a statement. “No one is immune to this virus. I urge anyone who has not done so to get their vaccines and boosters.”

Associated Press writers Robert Gillies in Toronto and Thomas Adamson in Paris contributed to this report.

Biden and Dems scramble to salvage social, climate package

By LISA MASCARO and FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden, along with progressive and moderate Democrats, appears

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determined to return to the negotiating table with Sen. Joe Manchin, the holdout Democrat who effectively tanked the party's signature \$2 trillion domestic policy initiative.

In the days since the West Virginia lawmaker gave a thumbs down on the package, delivering a stunning blow to months of negotiations on Biden's agenda, Democrats of the left and center have joined the White House in attempting to salvage the social services and climate change bill.

"We have worked too long and too hard to give up now, and we have no intention of doing so," Rep. Pramila Jayapal, head of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, said in a statement Wednesday.

Jayapal said she and members of the caucus have expressed the need for the White House to pursue achieving the plan's goals through a combination of Biden's executive powers and legislation, instead of legislation alone.

"The legislative approach, while essential, has no certainty of timing or results," she said, "and we simply cannot wait to deliver tangible relief to people that they can feel and will make a difference in their lives and livelihoods."

At the same time, White House officials have spoken with Rep. Suzan DelBene, D-Wash., chair of the House's centrist New Democrat Coalition, on its plan to scale back the number of provisions but have them stay in effect longer. Manchin said he supports that approach but progressives have warned against reducing the number of initiatives laid out in the framework the White House released in late October.

But Republicans are voicing greater confidence now that they can beat back much of what they don't like in the package. "As we ended the year, it looks to me like they couldn't swallow the spinach," Sen. Mitch McConnell, the Senate Republican leader, said Wednesday of the Democrats.

Biden spoke Tuesday about the families who would benefit from the Democrats' ambitious, if now highly uncertain, plan to pour billions of dollars into child care, health care and other services.

"Senator Manchin and I are going to get something done," Biden said.

The president's off-the-cuff remarks were his first public statement since Manchin's announcement over the weekend that he would not support the bill, as is.

Since then, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer told Democrats on a 90-minute video call to expect a vote in January on the package.

Schumer told senators the party was "not giving up" on the proposal, according to a Democrat who was on the private call Tuesday and provided details on condition of anonymity.

But the Democrats face serious questions over whether the initiative can be refashioned to win Manchin's crucial vote and head off a devastating defeat for the party.

Manchin and his party are so far apart, his relationships so bruised after months of failed talks, it's unclear how they even get back to the negotiating table, let alone revive the more than 2,100-page bill.

All of that is encouraging to McConnell.

"Now, I know Schumer said last night on a call he's not giving up," the Kentucky Republican told the Hugh Hewitt Show. "I don't expect him to do, but the worst of BBB, it appears to me, is dead." He used the shorthand for the Build Back Better plan.

Biden spoke forcefully of the economic pressures that strip away the "dignity of a parent" trying to pay the bills, and the assistance millions could receive from the federal government with the legislation. He also said his package would help ease inflationary pressures and pointed to analyses suggesting it would boost the economy.

"I want to get things done," Biden said. "I still think there's a possibility of getting Build Back Better done."

The setback has thrown Biden's top legislative effort into deep doubt at a critical time, closing out the end of the president's first year and before congressional midterm elections when the Democrats' slim hold on Congress is at risk.

Coupled with solid Republican opposition, Manchin's vote is vital on this and other initiatives, including the Democrats' priority voting rights legislation that Schumer also said would come to an early vote.

Schumer has said that if Republicans continued to block voting rights legislation in January, the Senate would bring forward proposals for changing the Senate rules, a Democrat on the video call said. That's

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a nod to long-running efforts to adjust or end the filibuster, which typically requires a 60-vote threshold for measures to advance.

While Manchin has said he cannot explain the bill to constituents in West Virginia, a union representing coal miners, including some of the nearly 12,000 from his home state, urged the lawmaker to "revisit his opposition" to the package.

Cecil Roberts, president of the United Mine Workers of America, outlined the ways the package would benefit union members, such as those in West Virginia, the most coal-dependent state in the country.

Some of those provisions would extend the current fee paid by coal companies to fund benefits received by victims of coal workers' pneumoconiosis, or black lung. The bill would also provide tax incentives to encourage manufacturers to build facilities in the coalfields, potentially employing miners who have lost their jobs, according to the union.

The next steps remain highly uncertain for the president and his party, with Congress on recess for the holiday break.

The White House appeared to take interest in Manchin's and the centrist coalition's preference for a reimagined bill that would do far less but for longer than the bill passed by the House.

But it will be extraordinarily difficult for Democrats to rebuild trust in their ranks for a fresh round of negotiations, having devoted much of Biden's first year in office to what is now essentially a collapsed effort.

The package was among the biggest of its kind ever considered in Congress, unleashing billions of dollars to help American families nationwide — nearly all paid for with higher taxes on corporations and the wealthy.

For families with children, it would provide free pre-school and child care aid. There are subsidies for health insurance premiums, lower prescription drug costs and expanded Medicaid access in states that do not yet provide it. The bill would start a new hearing aid program for seniors. And it has more than \$500 billion to curb carbon emissions, a figure considered the largest federal expenditure ever to combat climate change.

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.

Associated Press writers Darlene Superville, Kevin Freking and Colleen Long contributed to this report.

This story has been corrected by deleting the reference to Jayapal and caucus members being in conversation with White House.

Parents charged in Oxford school shooting seek lower bail

By ED WHITE Associated Press

DETROIT (AP) — The parents of a teenager charged with killing four students at a Michigan high school didn't anticipate that he would commit violence and are "devastated" like others in the community, a lawyer said Wednesday in requesting that they be granted a lower bond.

James and Jennifer Crumbley are charged with involuntary manslaughter and have been jailed on \$500,000 bond since their arrest on Dec. 4. They're accused of making a gun accessible to Ethan Crumbley and failing to pull him out of school when summoned about his writings before the shooting on Nov. 30.

Defense attorney Shannon Smith acknowledged that Jennifer Crumbley sent a text message to her son that day, telling him "don't do it." But Smith said it was a plea for him to not kill himself after the shooting at Oxford High School had already occurred and the gun was missing from home.

Ethan Crumbley, 15, is charged as an adult with murder and other crimes.

"The Crumbleys, like every parent and community member, are devastated by the school shooting," Smith and co-counsel Mariell Lehman said in a court filing. "The last thing they expected was that a school shooting would take place, or that their son would be responsible."

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Smith asked that their bond be lowered to \$100,000. She said they would wear an electronic monitor if released from jail.

Oakland County prosecutor Karen McDonald has said she would oppose a lower bond. The Crumbleys were arrested at a Detroit art studio, hours after charges were announced on Dec. 3 and they failed to appear in court.

Smith said they had planned to appear the next day at a different court handling Saturday arraignments and were not trying to flee.

"It is clear from the media appearances by Ms. McDonald that this case is one she takes very personally, was filed out of anger and filed in an effort to send a message to gun owners," Smith said of the charges against the parents.

A judge is not expected to consider the new bond request until Jan. 7.

Follow Ed White at <http://twitter.com/edwritez>

Pause on student loan payments is extended through May 1

By COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration on Wednesday extended a student loan moratorium that has allowed tens of millions of Americans to put off debt payments during the pandemic.

Under the action, payments on federal student loans will remain paused through May 1. Interest rates will remain at 0% during that period, and debt collection efforts will be suspended. Those measures have been in place since early in the pandemic, but were set to expire Jan. 31.

President Joe Biden said financial recovery from the pandemic will take longer than job recovery, especially for those with student loans.

"We know that millions of student loan borrowers are still coping with the impacts of the pandemic and need some more time before resuming payments," he said in a statement, adding it was an issue he and the vice president "both care deeply about."

The omicron variant of COVID-19 that has swept through the U.S. with a fury has lent a new urgency to the question over whether the moratorium would be extended. Administration officials had initially said they expected the January extension to be the last. But even as the economy improves, there are concerns that borrowers are not ready to start payments again. Once the moratorium ends, those who were already behind on payments could have wages and benefits taken away as part of debt collection efforts.

The policy applies to more than 36 million Americans who have student loans that are held by the federal government. Their collective debt totals more than \$1.37 trillion, according to the latest Education Department data. About a third of borrowers are in default or delinquency and the average monthly payment is \$400 a month. Officials said the pause also helps about 5 million other borrowers currently in school who are not yet paying back loans but are accruing interest.

Education Secretary Miguel Cardona said in a statement that the extension will allow for repayment plans responsive to the financial needs of the students, including an income-driven repayment plan.

The continued pause "will provide critical relief to borrowers who continue to face financial hardships as a result of the pandemic, and will allow our administration to assess the impacts of omicron on student borrowers," Cardona said.

The Trump administration initially suspended federal student loan payments in March 2020 and later extended it through January 2021. Biden has now moved to continue it twice, and the Education Department raised concerns about the effects of suddenly restarting payments, both for students and administratively within the department.

The extension of the loan moratorium comes as decision whether to erase large swaths of student debt altogether is still on the table.

Some Democrats are pushing for mass forgiveness of debt. But Biden has questioned whether he has the authority for that kind of mass cancellation, and legal scholars differ on that. Earlier this year, Biden asked

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the Education and Justice departments to study the issue. Officials have said that work is still underway. Biden has previously said he supports canceling up to \$10,000 in student debt, but he has argued it should be done by Congress.

The extension was met with relief by student advocates, who pushed for a more permanent solution. "We can finally take a breath knowing that student loan payments will be paused again," said Wisdom Cole, NAACP Youth & College national director.

But true relief would only come with the cancellation of student loan debt, Cole said. "To provide financial relief during omicron, cancel student debt," he said. "To boost the economy, cancel student debt. To address the racial wealth gap, cancel student debt."

Meanwhile, in October, the administration relaxed the rules for the student loan forgiveness program it has in place already, ditching some of the toughest requirements around the program that was launched in 2007 to steer more college graduates into public service.

Biden said that he was also asking all student loan borrowers to "do their part as well." He said they should take full advantage of Education Department resources as they prepare for payments to resume, look at options to lower payments through income-based repayment plans, explore public service loan forgiveness, and "make sure you are vaccinated and boosted when eligible."

Jan. 6 panel seeks interview with Trump ally Rep. Jim Jordan

By FARNOUSH AMIRI and MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House panel investigating the Jan. 6 U.S. Capitol insurrection on Wednesday requested an interview with Republican Rep. Jim Jordan of Ohio, one of former President Donald Trump's closest allies in Congress, as the committee closes in on members of its own chamber.

In a letter to Jordan, Mississippi Rep. Bennie Thompson, Democratic chairman of the panel, said the panel wants the lawmaker to provide information for its investigation surrounding his communications with Trump on Jan. 6 and Trump's efforts to challenge the result of the 2020 election.

"We understand that you had at least one and possibly multiple communications with President Trump on January 6th," the letter reads. "We would like to discuss each such communication with you in detail."

The request is the second by the nine-member panel this week and launches a new phase for the lawmakers on the committee, who have so far resisted going after one of their own as they investigate the insurrection by supporters and his efforts to overturn the election.

Jordan is a staunch supporter of the former president's false claims about voter fraud. The lawmaker brought those claims up during an October hearing on a motion to hold former White House chief strategist Stephen K. Bannon in contempt for refusing to comply with a congressional subpoena.

In that hearing, Jordan admitted once again that he spoke with Trump on the day of the attack. "Of course, I talked to the president," Jordan told members of the Rules Committee, in response to questioning from the panel's chairman, Rep. Jim McGovern, D-Mass. "I talked to him that day. I've been clear about that. I don't recall the number of times, but it's not about me. I know you want to make it about that."

A request for comment from Jordan's office was not immediately returned.

The panel is also seeking information regarding Jordan's meeting with Trump and members of his administration in November and December 2020, and in early January 2021, "about strategies for overturning the results of the 2020 election." The letter goes on to say the committee is also interested in any discussions Jordan may have had during that time regarding the possibility of presidential pardons for people involved in any aspect of the Capitol attack or the planning for the two rallies that took place that day.

Thompson writes that Jordan has already publicly signaled a willingness to cooperate with the panel's efforts to get answers about Jan. 6, citing the lawmaker's quote from that October hearing: "I've said all along, I have nothing to hide. I've been straightforward all along."

On Monday, the committee sent a similar request to Republican Rep. Scott Perry of Pennsylvania, who the panel believes had "an important role" in efforts to install then-Justice Department official Jeffrey Clark

as acting attorney general in late 2020.

Perry rejected the committee's request Tuesday, calling the committee and its investigation "illegitimate."

In response, Tim Mulvey, a committee spokesperson, said that while the panel prefers to gather evidence from members "cooperatively," it will pursue such information "using other tools" if necessary.

The panel has already interviewed about 300 people as it seeks to create a comprehensive record of the Jan. 6 attack and the events leading up to it.

Trump at the time was pushing false claims of widespread voter fraud and lobbying Vice President Mike Pence and Republican members of Congress to try to overturn the count at the Jan. 6 congressional certification. Election officials across the country, along with the courts, had repeatedly dismissed Trump's claims.

Research: Wreck of last US slave ship mostly intact on coast

By JAY REEVES Associated Press

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (AP) — Researchers studying the wreckage of the last U.S. slave ship, buried in mud on the Alabama coast since it was scuttled in 1860, have made the surprising discovery that most of the wooden schooner remains intact, including the pen that was used to imprison African captives during the brutal journey across the Atlantic Ocean.

While the upper portion of the two-masted Clotilda is gone, the section below deck where the captured Africans and stockpiles were held is still largely in one piece after being buried for decades in a section of river that hasn't been dredged, said maritime archaeologist James Delgado of the Florida-based SEARCH Inc.

At least two-thirds of the ship remains, and the existence of the unlit and unventilated slave pen, built during the voyage by the addition of a bulkhead where people were held as cargo below the main deck for weeks, raises questions about whether food and water containers, chains and even human DNA could remain in the hull, said Delgado.

"It's a stunning revelation," he said in an interview.

The discovery enhances the research value of the Clotilda's remains and sets them apart from all other wrecks, Delgado said. The finding was confirmed in a report that was provided to The Associated Press and led to the site becoming part of the National Register of Historic Places in November.

"It's the most intact (slave ship) wreck ever discovered," he said. "It's because it's sitting in the Mobile-Tensaw Delta with fresh water and in mud that protected it that it's still there."

For Joycelyn Davis, a sixth-generation granddaughter of African captive Charlie Lewis and vice president of the Clotilda Descendants Association, the story of what happened more than 160 years ago is best told through the people who were involved, not a sunken ship. But she said she's excited to learn more about what has been discovered, adding: "I think it's going to be a surprise for us all."

The Clotilda was the last ship known to transport African captives to the American South for enslavement. Nearly 90 feet (27 meters) in length, it departed Mobile, Alabama, for an illegal trip to purchase people decades after Congress outlawed such trade in 1808.

The ship had been sent across the ocean on a voyage financed by a wealthy businessman whose descendants remain prominent in Mobile. The Clotilda's captain transferred its human cargo off the ship once it arrived in Alabama and set fire to the vessel to hide evidence of the journey. But most of the ship didn't catch fire and remained in the river.

Shown on navigational charts since the 1950s, the wreckage was publicly identified as that of Clotilda in 2019 and has been explored and researched since then, Delgado said.

The state has set aside \$1 million for preservation and research, and additional work planned at the site in early 2022 could show what's inside the hull, Delgado said. But far more work is needed to determine whether the ship could ever be pulled out of the mud and put on display, as some have suggested.

"Generally, raising is a very expensive proposition. My sense is that while it has survived, it is more fragile than people think," said Delgado. "A recovery could be a very delicate operation and also a very expensive and lengthy process."

Freed after the South lost the Civil War, some of the enslaved Africans who were transported to America

on the Clotilda settled in a community they started called Africatown USA a few miles north of downtown Mobile.

A documentary about the now-impoverished community by Alabama-born filmmaker Margaret Brown titled "Descendant" will premiere at the Sundance Film Festival in January, and descendants of the Clotilda captives are planning an annual gathering in February. Work is underway on a new museum that's meant to be a catalyst for tourism and new development in the area.

Reeves is a member of AP's Race and Ethnicity Team.

9 days after tornado, cat found in rubble of building

By REBECCA REYNOLDS Associated Press

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (AP) — Nine days after a tornado demolished his three-story office building in downtown Mayfield, Kentucky, Sonny "Hoot" Gibson was standing in the rubble when he thought he heard a faint meow.

It instantly gave him hope that his office cat, Madix, who hadn't been seen since before the storms hit, was alive. Gibson said he had tried to find the solid black cat with yellow eyes that liked to greet customers of his rental business, but had given up after a few days.

"I don't know how anything could've survived not just the tornado but the destruction that came along with it," he said.

Gibson was standing in the rubble Sunday afternoon when he heard the faint noise.

"I thought I heard a meow, and I thought my mind's playing tricks on me so I hollered his name out, and he meowed again," Gibson said.

The noise was stifled and he couldn't locate Madix immediately so he called some employees who came to help search. Soon after, they found the cat in a hole beneath the rubble.

"It was just an incredible feeling to put him in my arms," Gibson said. "If cats actually have nine lives, he probably used up about eight of them in that nine-day period."

Other than being very hungry and thirsty, Madix was unscathed. Gibson said he took Madix home, where he will live out the rest of his days as a house cat.

Gibson said the story of Madix the survivor is becoming popular around the town of Mayfield, where a long-track tornado demolished huge parts of the community.

"It's a blessing for people to hear the story so they can take that and realize that great things can come out of terrible situations. If it's uplifting to one person, then Madix has served his purpose on this planet."

McConnell openly courts Manchin to leave Democrats, join GOP

By KEVIN FREKING and FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Mitch McConnell is done with subtleties. The Senate Republican leader is putting his party's courtship of Joe Manchin on full public display after the West Virginia Democrat's fractious split with the White House over the president's big social and environmental spending package.

McConnell says Manchin "feels like a man alone" and if he were to switch parties, "he would be joining a lot of folks who have similar views on a whole range of issues."

Whether Manchin is open to McConnell's appeal — he has consistently said he still sees himself as a Democrat — is uncertain. But it is clear that if he were to switch it would fundamentally alter the balance of power in Washington as well as seriously threaten Joe Biden's legislative prospects for the rest of his presidency.

McConnell dangled the prospect of Manchin retaining his prized Energy Committee chairmanship during an interview Wednesday and played up the West Virginian's growing distance from Democrats in his opposition to Biden's package.

A flip by Manchin would give Republicans control of the Senate and effectively end any chance of Demo-

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crats being able to get legislation or nominations through on party-line votes.

The rift escalated after Manchin said over the weekend that he couldn't vote for the social spending package that Democrats have pitched as their top domestic priority going into next year's elections.

"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 told "Fox News Sunday."

That prompted a sharply worded response from White House press secretary Jen Psaki, who said Manchin had "in person" given Biden a written proposal that was "the same size and scope" as a framework for the bill that Democrats rallied behind in October — and that he had agreed to continue talks.

"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.

The White House had basically called Manchin "a liar," McConnell said in a radio appearance on the Hugh Hewitt Show.

"It was astonishing. Usually when you've got a member who is a little bit out of sync with everybody else, you give them a lot of love. They did exactly the opposite," McConnell said.

He said he's had conversations over the years with Manchin about his party affiliation.

"If he were to join us, he would be joining a lot of folks who have similar views on a whole range of issues."

One big obstacle to a party switch would be Manchin's vote in February in favor of the impeachment of former President Donald Trump for his actions during the violent insurrection at the Capitol. West Virginia voted for Trump by more than 2-to-1, and Trump has called for defeating Republicans who voted for impeachment.

But Manchin, the only Democrat in his state's congressional delegation, is popular back home. He was twice elected governor before his election to the Senate in 2010. He'll be up for re-election in 2024 should he decide to seek another term.

West Virginia is still coal country, and Democrat Manchin is chairman of the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources. If he were to switch parties, McConnell and the Republicans could choose a new chairman.

"That's something we have talked to him about," McConnell said. "Obviously, I'm sure he enjoyed being a chair of the committee. It's important to West Virginia, and all of those things are things we have discussed."

McConnell also addressed questions about Manchin in an interview late Wednesday on Fox News, saying he admired Manchin's stand on the social spending package.

"I think they will keep coming back to him. I've suggested a good solution to his problem would be to come across the aisle and join us where he would be treated with respect," McConnell said.

Manchin has long faced questions about his place in the Democratic Party, and the talk took on fresh urgency in October when a Mother Jones article said he had been telling associates he was seriously considering leaving the party. But six days after the article was published, while sitting down with the Economic Club in Washington, Manchin rejected the reports, saying "I don't think the Rs would be any happier with me than Ds are right now."

He added, "So I don't know where in the hell I belong."

The question has been posed to him repeatedly in the past few weeks, coming to a breaking point Monday morning, hours after he had publicly voiced his opposition to Biden's bill.

"I would like to hope that there are still Democrats that feel like I do," he said. "I'm fiscally responsible and socially compassionate."

"Now, if there's no Democrats like that, then they have to push me wherever they want."

Party switching in the Senate is rare but has been consequential. Republicans lost control of the Senate two decades ago when James Jeffords of Vermont quit the party to become an independent. Jeffords, upset with President George W. Bush's opposition to the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, declared in May of 2001 that he would leave and caucus with the Democrats.

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McConnell said Jeffords had "become very uncomfortable on our side." He said Republican lawmakers courted him "because we were always fearful he would do exactly what he ended up doing. So, no, I mean, we certainly didn't do anything like the White House did to Joe Manchin the other day."

While all this swirls, Biden is making clear that he believes he can still reach an agreement with the West Virginian on a social spending package.

"Senator Manchin and I are going to get something done," Biden declared at the White House on Tuesday.

NHL announces players won't be allowed to go to Olympics

By STEPHEN WHYNO AP Hockey Writer

The inevitability sunk in for Steven Stamkos a full day before the NHL made it official that players would not be allowed to participate in the Beijing Olympics.

Left off Canada's Olympic roster in 2010, injured after being named to the team in 2014 and unable to go in 2018 because the NHL opted out, the Tampa Bay Lightning captain crystallized what it meant that the pandemic was wiping out participation at the 2022 Beijing Games, too.

"That was my third legitimate chance of playing in the Olympics, and here I am sitting (here) probably not even going to get to play a game," Stamkos said. "It's disappointing, but at the same time there's not much that we can do."

Commissioner Gary Bettman made the announcement Wednesday, making official what seemed inevitable in recent days when a rash of positive COVID-19 test results caused several teams to shut down and the list of postponed games ballooned to 50. The league will use the previously scheduled Feb. 6-22 Olympic break to make up those games and others that need to be rescheduled.

"Given the profound disruption to the NHL's regular-season schedule caused by recent COVID-related events ... Olympic participation is no longer feasible," Bettman said. "Our focus and goal have been and must remain to responsibly and safely complete the entirety of the NHL regular season and Stanley Cup playoffs in a timely manner."

In a separate statement, National Hockey League Players' Association executive director Don Fehr said that while there was a clear path to Beijing before COVID-19 intervened, the Olympic break is now needed to make up games.

Stamkos, Swedish teammate Victor Hedman and many of the NHL's best players may have missed their Olympic window entirely after growing up hoping to one day represent their country on sports' biggest international stage. Hedman said Tuesday, "Us to not be able to go, it's going to hurt for a while."

The International Olympic Committee said it is disappointed for players who pushed for the agreement to go to Beijing. The extension of the collective bargaining agreement between the NHL and NHLPA included Olympic participation, though that was contingent on pandemic conditions that ultimately proved too daunting to overcome.

"We made this a big part of our collective bargaining agreement as the players to try to bring the Olympics back," U.S.-born Winnipeg Jets forward Kyle Connor said. "Whether there's circumstances around going to China and with COVID and everything, whether there was going to be fans, I think it still would have been a great tournament, great hockey."

International officials and national federations must now pivot to Plan B for a second consecutive Olympic men's hockey tournament without NHL players. USA Hockey said it will soon announce new management and coaching staffs, and Hockey Canada is expected to draw from the executives, coaches and players who took part in an international tournament in Moscow this month.

Former Montreal Canadiens coach Claude Julien is the leading candidate to be behind the bench for Canada, which left with the bronze medal in 2018 when NHL players did not go to Pyeongchang, after back-to-back gold in 2010 and 2014.

Russians won gold in South Korea playing under the name Olympic Athletes from Russia, part of the fallout from years of doping disputes. Expected to play in Beijing as the Russian Olympic Committee, the team is now the favorite given the talent available in the Kontinental Hockey League.

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"We continue to look forward to the participation of the world's best hockey players from the other elite ice hockey leagues around the world in Beijing," the IOC said in a statement. "Their performances in Pyeongchang achieved a large international broadcast audience and demonstrated the exciting, passionate ice hockey that we can expect, which, as in 2018, will be followed by fans from all around the world."

The U.S. and Canada could choose from a mix of professionals from European leagues and college players. The lack of NHL participation turns the tournament from a competition featuring the best players in the world back into what it looked like prior to 1998.

"Although we are disappointed to receive this decision by the NHL and NHLPA, we nevertheless fully understand the circumstances that forced this action to be taken," International Ice Hockey Federation president Luc Tardif said in a statement. "It was a shock to see how COVID-19 affected the NHL schedule almost overnight, and we understand the NHL's decision is in the best interest of the health and safety of its players."

The NHL's focus is on completing an 82-game regular season for the first time since 2018-19. The schedule already was extended through April, with the playoffs going to the end of June, with more than two weeks off in between for the Olympics.

When Olympic participation was confirmed in September, teams were sent two versions of the NHL schedule. The sheer volume of postponements forces the league to use that break for makeup dates, rather than folding later games into February and move up the start of the playoffs.

Despite the NHL not being part of the Olympics for just the second time since Nagano in 1998, Bettman, Fehr and Tardif expressed optimism about a return for 2026. That's not much of a consolation for Stamkos on the verge of his 32nd birthday, but it could allow Auston Matthews, Connor McDavid, Nathan MacKinnon, Connor and others to get their first chance in Milan and Cortina.

"If the next one's in four years, I'll be 32 and I know I'll be still playing my best hockey, but we'll see," U.S.-born Jets goaltender Connor Hellebuyck said. "We'll see if it's the same story."

More AP Olympics: <https://apnews.com/hub/olympic-games> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

Development and conservation clash at Komodo National Park

By VICTORIA MILKO Associated Press

JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — On a dirt path, forked yellow tongue darting from its mouth, a member of the world's largest lizard species lazes on an island in eastern Indonesia's Komodo National Park as tourists snap photos. And about 18 miles (30 kilometers) away on another park island that harbors Komodo dragons, trees have been removed and concrete poured for new tourist facilities that have aroused the ire of residents and environmental activists.

The construction is part of an ambitious Indonesian initiative that has generated tensions between a government that wants to develop natural attractions for luxury tourism and conservationists who fear habitat for the endangered Komodo dragon will be irreparably harmed. United Nations officials have also voiced concerns about potential tourism impacts on this unique wildlife-rich park.

Encompassing about 850 square miles (2,200 square kilometers) of land and marine area, Komodo National Park was established in 1980 to help protect the famed dragons. Indonesia's Ministry of Environment and Forestry estimates around 3,000 of the reptiles live there today, along with manatee-like dugongs, sea turtles, whales and more than a thousand species of tropical fish.

Because of its biodiversity and beauty, the park became a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization World Heritage Site in 1991. And it's one of Indonesia's crown jewels for tourism, typically drawing hundreds of thousands of visitors from around the world each year.

For years the government has been trying to figure out how to best capitalize on the park, most recently designating it part of the country's "10 New Balis" initiative — an effort to draw more tourists, as the island of Bali did before border restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We are embarking into a new era of tourism in Indonesia based on nature and culture, focusing on

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sustainability and quality tourism," Indonesian Minister of Tourism and Creative Economy Sandiaga Uno told The Associated Press.

Part of that multimillion dollar tourism development is a project on Rinca Island, where more than one-third of the park's dragons are estimated to live on generally hot and dry terrain. The construction includes an expanded ranger station, viewing platform, boat dock, toilets and other infrastructure.

The project worries local environmental activists and residents within park boundaries who say their livelihoods as tour guides, boat drivers and souvenir sellers depend on the draw of the area's natural beauty.

"When we talk about the development in the conservation area, we have to think ... whether this is a wisely considered economic effect for the local people — or the environmental effect," said Gregorius Afioma, a member of the local non-governmental organization Sun Spirit for Justice and Peace. "The situation now is like collective suicide.

"We think that this kind of business will eventually kill others' businesses and even themselves because they destroyed the environment," Afioma said, adding that local residents also fear they won't get construction jobs for the luxury tourist destination the Indonesian government is promoting.

UNESCO — the United Nations body that designates World Heritage Site status — has also raised concerns about development in the park.

"The state party did not inform us, as required by the operational guidelines," said Guy Debonnet, chief of the body's natural heritage unit. "This is definitely a project of concern, because we feel that the impacts on the universal value (of the park) have not been properly evaluated."

During a meeting in July, UNESCO expressed other concerns, such as the project's reduction of the park's wilderness zone to one-third the previous area, addition of tourism concessions within the property, lack of an adequate environmental impact assessment, and a target to dramatically increase visitors.

"Third-party information transmitted to the State Party indicates that a target of 500,000 annual visitors for the property has been proposed, which is more than double the pre-COVID-19 pandemic visitor numbers," said a report from the meeting. "This raises the question of how this tourism model fits (Indonesia's) vision of moving away from mass tourism to more sustainable approaches."

At UNESCO's request, the country submitted more information about the project. But after reviewing it, the U.N. agency requested in October 2020 that Indonesia not "proceed with any tourism infrastructure project that may affect the Outstanding Universal Value of the property prior to a review of the relevant environmental impact assessment" by the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

IUCN is an international, non-governmental organization that provides UNESCO's World Heritage Committee with technical evaluations of natural heritage properties.

After multiple attempts to get permission from government authorities, The Associated Press was unable to gain access to the construction site, which has been closed to the public for months. But satellite imagery shows construction continued after UNESCO requested the project be paused. The government did not respond to an email last week seeking comment.

As of Dec. 6, UNESCO still had not received the requested revised assessment, said Debonnet, the world heritage unit chief.

The Indonesian government also granted at least two business permits in Komodo National Park, including for projects on Rinca, Komodo and Padar islands, according to an email to the AP from Shana Fatina, president director at the Labuan Bajo Flores Tourism Authority, which helps coordinate government tourism efforts.

Some experts fear tourism expansion in the park could lead to disturbance of Komodo dragon habitat.

The predatory lizards, which can reach a length of 10 feet (3 meters) and more than 300 pounds (135 kilograms), were recently moved from "vulnerable" to "endangered" status on the IUCN list of threatened species. The organization cited the impacts of climate change and deterioration of the dragons' habitat — including human encroachment — as reasons for the change.

Unless carefully managed, tourism projects could "have a big impact, not just from the number of people disturbing the behavior of the dragons and disturbing their prey, but also how much freshwater is being siphoned off," said Bryan Fry, an associate professor at the School of Biological Sciences at the University

of Queensland in Australia. "That could dramatically impact the very delicate balance of these islands."

The opening date for the new Rinca Island facilities has yet to be announced. UNESCO's Debonnet said it is engaged in talks with Indonesian officials to arrange a monitoring mission to assess the impact of ongoing development on the park and review its state of conservation.

And while World Heritage sites are usually discussed by the UNESCO committee on two-year cycles, Komodo National Park will be discussed in 2022, said Debonnet. "That is kind of an indication that we see there is some urgency in this issue," he said.

Follow Victoria Milko on Twitter: @thevmilko

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French kids line up to get vaccine shots as omicron spreads

By ANGELA CHARLTON and BARBARA SURK Associated Press

SAINT-QUENTIN-EN-YVELINES, France (AP) — French schoolchildren clung nervously to their parents as they entered a vast vaccine center west of Paris on Wednesday — then walked excitedly away with a decorated "vaccination diploma," as France kicked off mass COVID-19 inoculations for children age 5 to 11.

It's not a moment too soon for the French government, which is facing the highest recorded infection rates since the pandemic began but trying to avoid a new lockdown.

The health minister said Wednesday that the swiftly-spreading omicron variant is expected to be dominant in France by next week, but ruled out additional restrictions on public life for now. Officials are hoping that a surge in vaccinations will be enough to limit the mounting pressure on hospitals, where COVID-19 patients occupy more than 60% of beds.

At a "vaccinodrome" in the Paris suburb of Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines, children lined up for first-day jabs Wednesday wearing masks adorned with puppies, flowers or Marvel superheros.

One worked out his nerves by rolling his toy car on any surface he could find. Another played games on his mom's phone. Eight-year-old Alvin Yin cried, while his 9-year-old sister Noemie tried to comfort him.

Dimitri Marck, 8, admitted, "It's a little weird. I heard about this on TV, and now I'm here." But he said he's glad to get vaccinated so he can see grandparents for the holidays.

France started vaccinating 5- to 11-year-olds with health risks earlier this month and expanded it to all children in that age group Wednesday as part of accelerated vaccination efforts. Children need the consent of at least one parent, and one parent has to be present when they get a shot.

As of early December, more than 1,000 in every 100,000 children in France aged 6-10 were infected with coronavirus, according to government figures. Currently, 145 children are hospitalized for severe illness due to COVID-19 and 27 children are receiving medical treatment in intensive care units, Health Minister Olivier Veran said Wednesday on BFM television.

France registered 72,832 new cases Tuesday and has 16,000 people hospitalized with COVID-19, among the highest numbers in Europe.

In a radio interview Wednesday, Labor Minister Elisabeth Borne asked companies to let employees work remotely wherever possible for at least three if not four days a week. French businesses largely returned to in-person work in 2020.

France has shut down nightclubs and banned New Year's Eve fireworks and other mass end-of-year celebrations, including concerts.

"It's an evening sacrificed for a good cause," Veran said.

But his main message was to urge more vaccination. More than 89% of people 12 and over in France have had two doses, and about a third have had a booster shot.

Hugo, 8, was the last member of his family to get the shot and felt left out. His father, Benoit Chappaz, said they got him vaccinated "not because the government wants us to," but for their family's peace of

mind and for general public health.

Nearby, American-born Evan, 7, squirmed in his chair. His great-uncle died with COVID-19, and his family knows several people who have been hospitalized with the virus.

Asked how he would face the injection, he said, "I'm going to scream. And then maybe if Mommy agrees, I can get an ice cream or something sweet, because I got a vaccine."

As the doctor glided the needle into his arm, Evan didn't scream. Instead, he wrapped himself around his mother and buried his head in her jacket.

Then as he left, he proudly held up his "diplome de vaccination."

Surk contributed from Nice, France.

EXPLAINER: What to do if you test positive for COVID-19

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — You've tested positive for COVID-19. Now what?

The short answer for those in the U.S.: Stay home and avoid others. Tell the people you've been in close contact with that you tested positive. And if you have trouble breathing or develop other serious symptoms, see a doctor immediately.

COVID-19 diagnoses have been soaring since the recent arrival of the omicron variant. That means Americans should prepare for the possibility that they or someone they plan to see will suddenly be diagnosed with an infection.

ISOLATION

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that people who test positive stay home or isolate for 10 days. If you live with other people, that means staying in a separate room and using a separate bathroom, if possible. You should also wear a mask if you come into contact with others.

It's important to plan for this possibility and be ready to delay holiday gatherings, "so you don't make it up on the fly and don't cause a lot of confusion and unhappiness," advised Dr. William Schaffner, an infectious diseases specialist at Vanderbilt University.

MONITOR SYMPTOMS

You should get care if you develop worrisome symptoms. But there are many people with certain conditions — including heart diseases, diabetes and weakened immune systems — who should seek care even if they have mild illness, because of their elevated risk for developing serious complications.

TELL OTHERS

You should tell your doctor about your test, who may prescribe medications depending on your situation and health.

If you get tested at a clinic or doctor's office, the staff is supposed to notify health authorities about your positive result. Some health departments conduct contact-tracing investigations to identify the people an infected person has been in contact with.

You should also tell your close contacts that you tested positive and that they may have been exposed to the coronavirus. Remember, an infected person can begin spreading the virus as many as two days before developing symptoms or testing positive.

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US probes potential of drivers playing video games in Teslas

By TOM KRISHER AP Auto Writer

ATHENS, Ohio (AP) — The U.S. has opened a formal investigation into the potential for Tesla drivers to play video games on a center touch screen while the vehicle is in motion.

In a document posted Wednesday on its website, the agency says the feature, called "Passenger Play,"

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may distract the driver and increase the risk of a crash.

"To date, the agency has received one owner complaint describing the gameplay functionality and has confirmed that this capability has been available since December 2020 in Tesla "Passenger Play"-equipped vehicles," a NHTSA spokesman said in an email. "Before this time, enabling gameplay was only possible when the vehicle was in park."

The probe, which covers all four Tesla models, the S, X, Y and 3, was opened "to evaluate the driver distraction potential of Tesla 'Passenger Play' while the vehicle is being driven." Investigators "will evaluate aspects of the feature, including the frequency and use scenarios of Tesla "Passenger Play.""

The probe by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration covers about 580,000 electric cars and SUVs from model years 2017 through 2022.

The NHTSA documents do not list any crashes or injuries caused by the problem.

An investigation can lead to a recall. A message was left early Wednesday seeking comment from Tesla, which has disbanded its media relations department.

Tesla owner Vince Patton, who lives near Portland, Oregon, filed the complaint with the agency last month. In August, he was watching a YouTube video of a Tesla owner who discovered that he could now play a video game on his touch-screen while the vehicle is moving.

Curious to see for himself, Patton drove his own 2021 Tesla Model 3 to an empty community college parking lot, activated a game called "Sky Force Reloaded" from a menu and did a few loops.

"I was just dumbfounded that, yes, sure enough, this sophisticated video game came up," said Patton, a 59-year-old retired broadcast journalist who lives near Portland, Oregon.

He tried Solitaire, too, and was able to activate that game while driving. Later, he found he could browse the internet while his car was moving.

Patton, who loves his car and says he has nothing against Tesla, worries that drivers will play games and become dangerously distracted.

"Somebody's going to get killed," he said. "It's absolutely insane."

So he filed the complaint early last month.

"NHTSA needs to prohibit all live video in the front seat and all live interactive web browsing while the car is in motion," Patton wrote in his complaint. "Creating a dangerous distraction for the driver is recklessly negligent."

Earlier in December, Mercedes-Benz issued a recall for a similar issue caused by a computer configuration error, raising questions about whether Tesla was being allowed to do something that other automakers are not. Most automakers disable front touch screens while vehicles are moving.

In the Mercedes case, drivers could browse the internet or watch television while the cars were moving. The automaker said it intended to disable the features while the cars are in motion. The issue was corrected by updating a Mercedes server.

NHTSA already is investigating why Tesla's "Autopilot" partially automated driving system keeps crashing into stopped emergency vehicles, and it has inquired about why Tesla didn't file recall documents when it did an over-the-air internet update in an effort to address the safety problem. It's also looking into the performance of Tesla's "Full Self-Driving" software after getting a complaint that it nearly caused a crash.

Tesla says neither system can drive vehicles and that drivers must be ready to intervene at all times.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Dec. 23, the 357th day of 2021. There are eight days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 23, 1783, George Washington resigned as commander in chief of the Continental Army and retired to his home at Mount Vernon, Virginia.

On this date:

In 1788, Maryland passed an act to cede an area "not exceeding ten miles square" for the seat of the

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national government; about two-thirds of the area became the District of Columbia.

In 1928, the National Broadcasting Company set up a permanent, coast-to-coast network.

In 1941, during World War II, American forces on Wake Island surrendered to the Japanese.

In 1948, former Japanese premier Hideki Tojo and six other Japanese war leaders were executed in Tokyo.

In 1954, the first successful human kidney transplant took place at the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital in Boston as a surgical team removed a kidney from 23-year-old Ronald Herrick and implanted it in Herrick's twin brother, Richard.

In 1962, Cuba began releasing prisoners from the failed Bay of Pigs invasion under an agreement in which Cuba received more than \$50 million worth of food and medical supplies.

In 1968, 82 crew members of the U.S. intelligence ship Pueblo were released by North Korea, 11 months after they had been captured.

In 1972, a 6.2-magnitude earthquake struck Nicaragua; the disaster claimed some 5,000 lives.

In 1986, the experimental airplane Voyager, piloted by Dick Rutan (ruh-TAN') and Jeana (JEE'-nuh) Yeager, completed the first non-stop, non-refueled round-the-world flight as it returned safely to Edwards Air Force Base in California.

In 1997, a federal jury in Denver convicted Terry Nichols of involuntary manslaughter and conspiracy for his role in the Oklahoma City bombing, declining to find him guilty of murder. (Nichols was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole.)

In 2001, Time magazine named New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani its Person of the Year for his steadfast response to the 9/11 terrorist attack.

In 2003, a jury in Chesapeake, Virginia, sentenced teen sniper Lee Boyd Malvo to life in prison, sparing him the death penalty.

Ten years ago: After days of stalemate and rancor, Congress approved a two-month renewal of payroll tax cuts for 160 million workers and unemployment benefits for millions; President Barack Obama immediately signed the bill into law. Two car bombers blew themselves up in Damascus outside the heavily guarded compounds of Syria's intelligence agencies, killing at least 44 people and wounding dozens more in a brazen attack on the powerful security directorates.

Five years ago: The United States allowed the U.N. Security Council to condemn Israeli settlements in the West Bank and east Jerusalem as a "flagrant violation" of international law; the decision to abstain from the council's 14-0 vote was one of the biggest American rebukes of its longstanding ally in recent memory. Actor and writer Carrie Fisher was transported to a Los Angeles hospital after suffering a severe medical emergency on an international flight; she died four days later at age 60.

One year ago: Pfizer said it would supply the U.S. government with an additional 100 million doses of its COVID-19 vaccine under a new agreement between the pharmaceutical giant and the Trump administration. Two new studies provided encouraging evidence that having had COVID-19 may offer some protection against future infections. After months of fighting the coronavirus, the Fire Department of New York began vaccinating its own members, starting with the front-line EMTs who had responded to more than 1 million emergency medical calls throughout New York City in 2020.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Ronnie Schell is 90. Former Emperor Akihito of Japan is 88. Actor Frederic Forrest is 85. Rock musician Jorma Kaukonen (YOR'-mah KOW'-kah-nen) is 81. Actor-comedian Harry Shearer is 78. U.S. Army Gen. Wesley K. Clark (ret.) is 77. Actor Susan Lucci is 75. Singer-musician Adrian Belew is 72. Rock musician Dave Murray (Iron Maiden) is 65. Actor Joan Severance is 63. Singer Terry Weeks is 58. Rock singer Eddie Vedder (Pearl Jam) is 57. The former first lady of France, Carla Bruni-Sarkozy, is 54. Rock musician Jamie Murphy is 46. Jazz musician Irvin Mayfield is 44. Actor Estella Warren is 43. Actor Elvy Yost is 34. Actor Anna Maria Perez de Tagle (TAG'-lee) is 31. Actor Spencer Daniels is 29. Actor Caleb Foote is 28.