

Groton Daily Independent

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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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#498 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

Turned out there was some significant news I didn't think should wait until after Christmas, so I'm going to do a quick check-in here. We'll look at the current state of things, then address a few news stories and quit for the holiday. I really mean it this time.

Things are awful and getting worse. Today's seven-day new-case average has soared to 185,841. Last time we had this many new cases in a day was eleven months ago—last January. That's an 18 percent increase in two days and brings our pandemic total to 51,805,691. A little luck, and we could break 52 million before the end of the day tomorrow. Some Christmas gift that would be. Hospitalizations are up to 69,932; this is not as dramatic a rise as new cases which may be a good sign—or simply an indication that they haven't caught up to this surge yet. We'll see about that. Deaths are also holding fairly steady, up just a bit to 1369; let's hope that doesn't take a bad turn either.

Florida's back in the soup, having tripled their daily case rate in just a week. The surge is all Omicron which accounts for more than 95 percent of cases in their CDC region. Too many other states are also looking scary; we have 10 states and territories showing over 100 percent increases over the past two weeks, one over 800 percent. Eight more states have increases between 50 and 100 percent. Rough days ahead; in fact, they're already here. The Omicron variant has now been reported in every state in the three weeks since our first detected case. There's no escaping this one.

The Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) at the University of Washington is out with a new projection, and you're going to want to be sitting down when you read this. They think the current surge in cases will peak by the end of next month, infecting more than 400,000 people per day at that peak. Consider last winter's peak was around 250,000 per day; it simply boggles the mind. The good news (and surprisingly, there is some) is that we're really thinking this one's going to cause less severe disease and hospitalization. Although we focus here mostly on the US, the analysis also projected we would have another three billion infections across the world before spring, doubling the number we have had so far. This is some bad stuff.

Shortly after I posted my last Update on Wednesday, the FDA granted emergency use authorization (EUA) for Pfizer's antiviral Paxlovid in patients 12 and over. This is the oral antiviral that can be taken at home to prevent illness in high-risk patients. The course of treatment is three pills taken twice daily for five days, and it is given in combination with a long-standing antiviral called ritonavir. In clinical trials, this drug reduced the risk of hospitalization or deaths by around 89 percent when taken in the first three days of symptoms and by 88 percent when taken in the first five days.

We don't have trial results against Omicron; but preliminary studies are promising, and it doesn't seem likely its efficacy will be lower with this variant. This is because the mutations that make Omicron dangerous as a potential immune escape are in the spike (D) protein, and this drug doesn't act on that spike. It instead targets viral enzymes called proteases, and those don't seem to vary from one variant to the other. Supplies of the drug have begun to ship. Supplies will be very limited for a while; the company is pulling out all the stops to increase production.

Then yesterday, the FDA granted EUA to Merck's antiviral molnupiravir, a ribonucleoside analog, that is, a drug that interferes with the ability to make copies of the viral genome as the virus replicates, rendering new copies of the virus nonfunctional. While this drug is far less effective than Paxlovid at only about 30

I have a report on a new vaccine candidate just finishing up phase 1 human trials right now, this one from the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research who apparently began working on it right after the coronavirus genome was published in January, 2020. Their candidate is unlike anything I've seen from anyone else—so unlike I'm not sure exactly how to classify it if it even fits into any of the classes of vaccines we've discussed over the past year or two. They're calling it Spike Ferritin Nanoparticle vaccine of (SpFN), and apparently the folks in the phase 1 trial are demonstrating very robust antibody responses.

What we're talking about is a vaccine containing a "soccer ball-shaped protein" with 24 faces. There are the spikes of multiple viral strains on these faces for presentation to the immune cells it encounters; the

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goal is to produce a multivalent vaccine that will elicit immune responses to many variants, even those which have not yet developed. Tests in non-human primates showed the response protected against coronavirus variants from 2002, as well as those in the current pandemic. While it has not yet been tested in animals against Omicron—no time yet—laboratory neutralization assays are underway, so we should have information on this soon. Phase 1 data are under analysis now, and researchers are saying they should have something for us in coming weeks. There isn't anything published at this point, and so I am not clear how this is made or how it functions. I'll keep an eye out for further information.

We have a new study of SARS-CoV-2 infection in white-tailed deer which was published in Nature yesterday, this one from a team at The Ohio State University which has found three variants in the deer in that state. Over one-third of animals sampled were positive for the virus, and there was evidence of transmission among the deer too, which could lead to mutation among the animals. The strains seen in the deer matched those in local patients, so it is pretty clear there has been human-to-animal transmission. What's more, there is evidence of at least six different introductions into the wild herd, so this transmission wasn't just a fluke. While other studies have found this virus in deer, this is the first one that found replicating virus, not just genetic traces which may or may not have been capable of replication.

If deer serve as a reservoir for the virus, this group believes we will see one of two outcomes. The first is that the virus mutates in the deer so that it could transmit to other species including humans. This would be a way of getting yet another new variant into a human population which may not be immunologically protected against it. The other possibility is that the virus won't mutate in the deer, simply circulating among them, perhaps for years. Then at a point where the virus in humans has evolved so much that the (original) deer version is essentially an all-new virus to us, it could make its way back into humans, setting off a whole new round of infections. None of this sounds great.

Faced with this current surge and the likelihood it's going to get much worse, the CDC has shortened the recommended isolation time for health care workers who have tested positive and do not have symptoms to seven days. The new guidance for fully vaccinated and boosted workers who have had high-risk exposures says that these folks need not isolate at all if they've had a negative test. As crazy as this might sound to you, it's probably good practice because we know people who are vaccinated and boosted shed less virus over a shorter period of time. It has the added benefit of putting these desperately-needed workers back into circulation sooner, which will be critical to getting us all through the next few months.

We're seeing an unprecedented number of flight cancellations due to the Omicron variant. United cancelled 150 flights for today and another 44 for Christmas day. United canceled 120 flights today. Other airlines have followed suit. The problem is a direct one: Too many flight crew members are infected so that they cannot fly. You can't run a flight without a crew. I'd guess this is going to seriously disrupt holiday travel—probably already has.

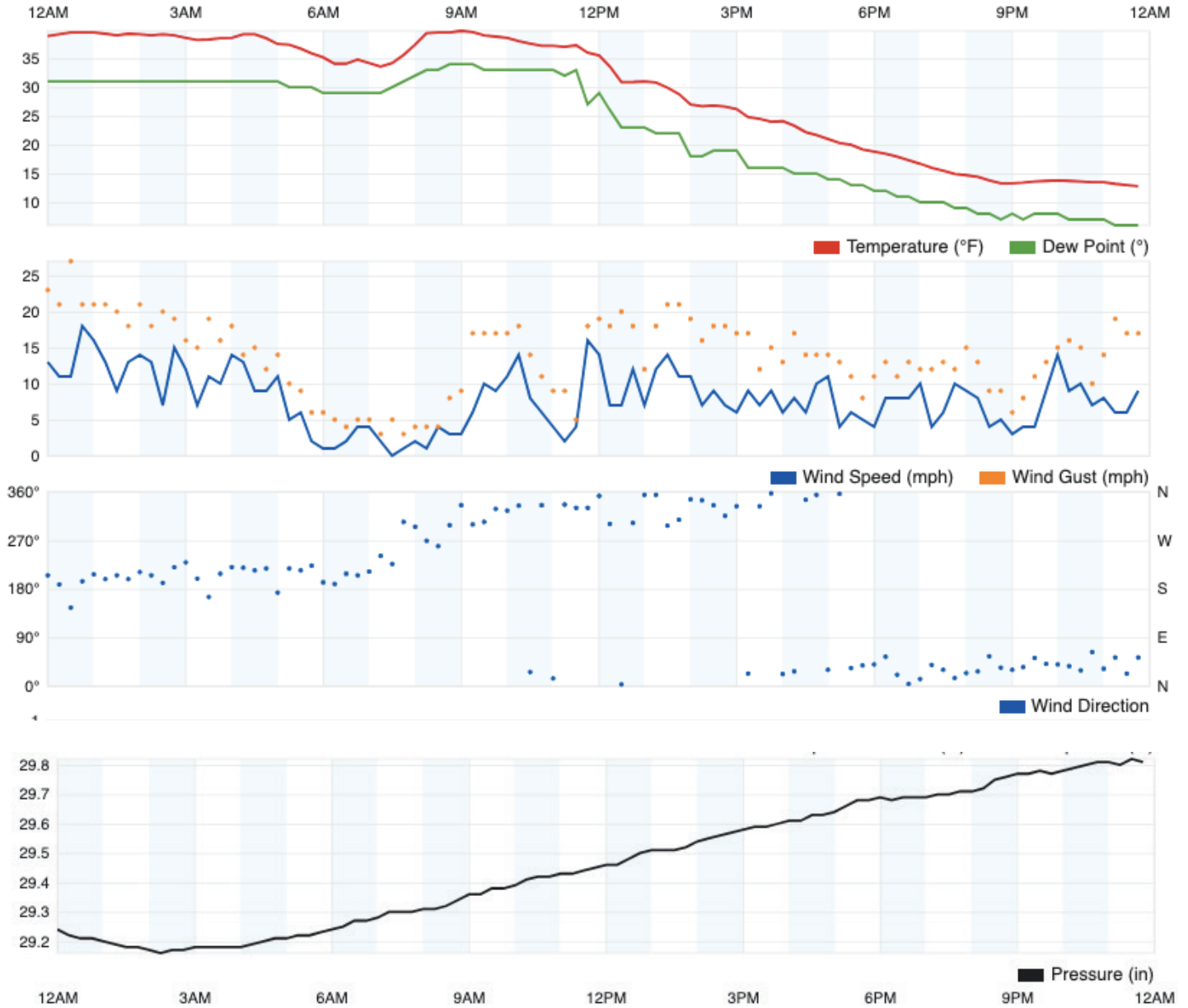
We have new vaccination data, and it's not all that rosy. We're up to 61.7 percent fully vaccinated, which is barely higher than it was a couple of weeks ago. We're administering just over 1.5 million doses per day with almost two-thirds of those boosters such that just over one-third of eligible adults are now boosted and 19 percent of the population is boosted. I find it sort of scary that only 56 percent of fully vaccinated people 65 and older have received boosters. Only around a quarter-million people are initiating vaccination each day right now and just over 280,000 are becoming fully vaccinated each day. That needs to step up, but I have no delusions about whether it will.

This is really it until after the holiday. Have a wonderful and safe Christmas, be careful if you gather with others, and we'll talk in a few days. Be well.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Snowfall Chances & Accumulations Through The Weekend



- Light Snow Today with a Second Round Sunday/Early Monday
- Expect Minor Travel Disruptions – Give Yourself Extra Time
- Breezy & Chilly Next Several Days

	Probability of Precipitation Forecast												Snow Forecast																		
	12/25 Sat				12/26 Sun				12/27 Mon				12/25 Sat			12/26 Sun			12/27 Mon												
	3am	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am	12pm	12am	6am	12pm	12am	6am	12pm					
Aberdeen	31	64	74	8	1	0	1	2	2	23	64	81	74	58	50	44	30	3	3	3	0.0	2.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.4	1.9	0.2	0.4	0.0	0.0
Britton	24	71	90	30	3	1	1	1	1	11	58	83	85	77	76	63	44	9	9	2	0.0	2.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.3	1.5	0.6	0.6	0.0	0.0
Eagle Butte	32	37	7	1	0	0	0	1	1	24	26	29	22	23	18	6	5	2	2	6	0.3	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.3	0.0	0.0	0.0
Eureka	60	86	56	3	1	0	1	2	2	25	55	68	63	63	54	43	29	3	3	8	0.2	2.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.3	0.8	0.5	0.7	0.0	0.0
Gettysburg	36	49	27	2	0	0	1	1	1	26	37	43	29	24	20	16	11	0	0	5	0.0	0.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.0
Kennebec	10	14	5	0	0	0	1	1	0	21	25	9	7	4	2	1	1	0	0	1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
McIntosh	66	74	25	6	2	0	1	1	1	25	40	47	64	73	68	24	17	2	2	9	1.1	1.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.4	1.1	0.1	0.0	0.0
Milbank	7	43	60	34	2	0	0	0	0	21	43	64	71	70	59	44	31	5	5	0	0.0	0.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.9	0.3	0.0	0.0	0.0
Miller	29	41	24	2	0	0	0	1	2	28	40	45	32	18	12	11	7	0	0	1	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Mobridge	58	80	27	2	0	0	1	1	1	24	36	41	49	54	36	26	18	1	1	8	0.3	1.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.2	0.6	0.5	0.0	0.0
Murdo	9	10	3	0	0	1	3	3	1	14	16	7	6	2	1	1	1	0	0	1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Pierre	23	31	9	0	0	0	1	1	1	23	27	15	15	8	5	3	2	0	0	2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Redfield	30	47	48	4	1	0	0	1	2	25	49	59	52	30	26	25	17	1	1	1	0.0	0.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Sisseton	16	57	74	38	4	0	0	1	1	12	53	77	80	80	74	61	43	10	10	1	0.0	1.8	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.1	1.4	1.2	0.2	0.0	0.0
Watertown	8	40	54	13	0	0	0	1	1	22	45	65	72	47	36	31	21	1	1	0	0.0	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Wheaton	8	39	54	54	18	1	1	0	0	7	42	68	81	85	83	66	48	13	13	1	0.0	1.7	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.7	1.5	0.5	0.0	0.0

May Be A Short Period Of Freezing Drizzle

Visit www.weather.gov/abr for a detailed local forecast

Updated: 12/25/2021 3:12 AM CT

NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE
OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION

Two round of winter weather this weekend may lead to minor travel disruptions. Accumulations shouldn't be too dramatic, just give yourself extra time to get to your destination. Seasonal wintertime weather will continue into the week.

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Today in Weather History

December 25, 1983: Winds of 20 to 30 mph, with occasional higher gusts, combined with very light falling snow and loose surface snow to cause near-blizzard conditions and dangerously low wind chills in most of South Dakota, as well as in southwest and west-central Minnesota, from the early evening of the 23rd into Christmas morning. Visibilities were frequently near zero, and four- to five-foot drifts closed the vast majority of roads, making travel impossible. Hundreds of motorists became stranded during the evenings of December 23rd and 24th. In Minnesota, many holiday travelers heading west from Minneapolis and St. Paul drove to central Minnesota before conditions became too severe to continue. Winds and severe cold in the western part of Minnesota caused several power outages as well as the loss of livestock.

In South Dakota, at least 70 vehicles were stalled at one point over a 14-mile stretch of Interstate 90 between Kennebec and Reliance in Lyman County. The Pierre Airport in Hughes County was closed twice on the 23rd as visibility was reduced to zero. Most flights were canceled at Sioux Falls Airport in Minnehaha County, stranding numerous holiday travelers. Sub-zero temperatures, combined with gusts of over 60 mph, produced wind chill indices in the 60 to 100 below zero range. Several cases of frostbite were reported, propane gas solidified, fuel jelled, and water pipes and tanks froze as a result of the extreme cold. In Minnehaha County at Wall Lake, electrical outages of 12 hours were experienced from power lines snapping as a result of the cold and winds.

1776: Thomas Jefferson noted that the first winter snow fell on December 20th, but did not last on the ground one day. Temperatures dropped to 30 degrees or colder on Christmas Day. That night, 22 inches of snow fell. From the 25th of December until March 6, 10 snow covered the ground, and some of them were deep. The first rain came on the 9th of March. In Frederick County, two feet of snow was recorded.

1872: Since records began back in 1887, Columbia, South Carolina, only a trace of snow has been reported on Christmas Day. Before records, 13-hour sleet, and snowstorm occurred in Columbia and surrounding areas. Credit goes to Cary Mock, a USC geography professor who specializes in historical weather research. Here is a link to the newspaper article.

1966 - A white Christmas was enjoyed by residents from North Carolina to New England in the wake of a major snowstorm. Even coastal Virginia was white. (David Ludlum)

1974: Cyclone Tracy was a small but powerful tropical storm that devastated the city of Darwin, Northern Territory, Australia, from December 24-26th, 1974. The storm was the second smallest tropical cyclone on record, in terms of gale-force wind diameter, behind Tropical Storm Marco in 2008.

1980 - It was the coldest Christmas Day of modern record in the northeastern U.S. Temperatures as cold as 36 degrees below zero were reported in New York State, and as the sharp cold front swept south-eastward the temperature at Boston MA plunged from 34 degrees to seven degrees below zero during the day. (David Ludlum)

1983 - It was the coldest Christmas Day of modern record for the central and eastern U.S. More than 125 cities reported record low temperatures for the date, and thirty-four of those cities reported all-time records for the month of December. The temperature plunged to one degree below zero at Huntsville AL, and dipped to 14 degrees at Galveston TX. Snow covered the ground from the Pacific Northwest through much of the Great Plains Region to the Northern Appalachians. (The National Weather Summary)

1987: Since 1894, Tucson, Arizona, has seen snow on Christmas Day four times. The most recent event occurred in 1987 when Tucson saw 2.6 inches.

2002: A major snowstorm moved up the east coast on Christmas Day, 2002. Widespread snowfalls of a foot or more occurred across much of central New York and northeast Pennsylvania, with amounts as high as 30 inches reported over the northwest slopes of the Catskills.

2010 - Up to 32 inches of snow and blizzard conditions affected parts of the eastern U.S. on December 25th-27th. A state of emergency was declared in North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Maine. In New York City, up to 24.5 inches of snow fell, effectively shutting down rail lines, major airports, and bus services. Thousands of flights were cancelled and stranded subway riders were forced to spend a night in unheated train cars. One person was reported killed in Maine due to the weather conditions. (NCDC)

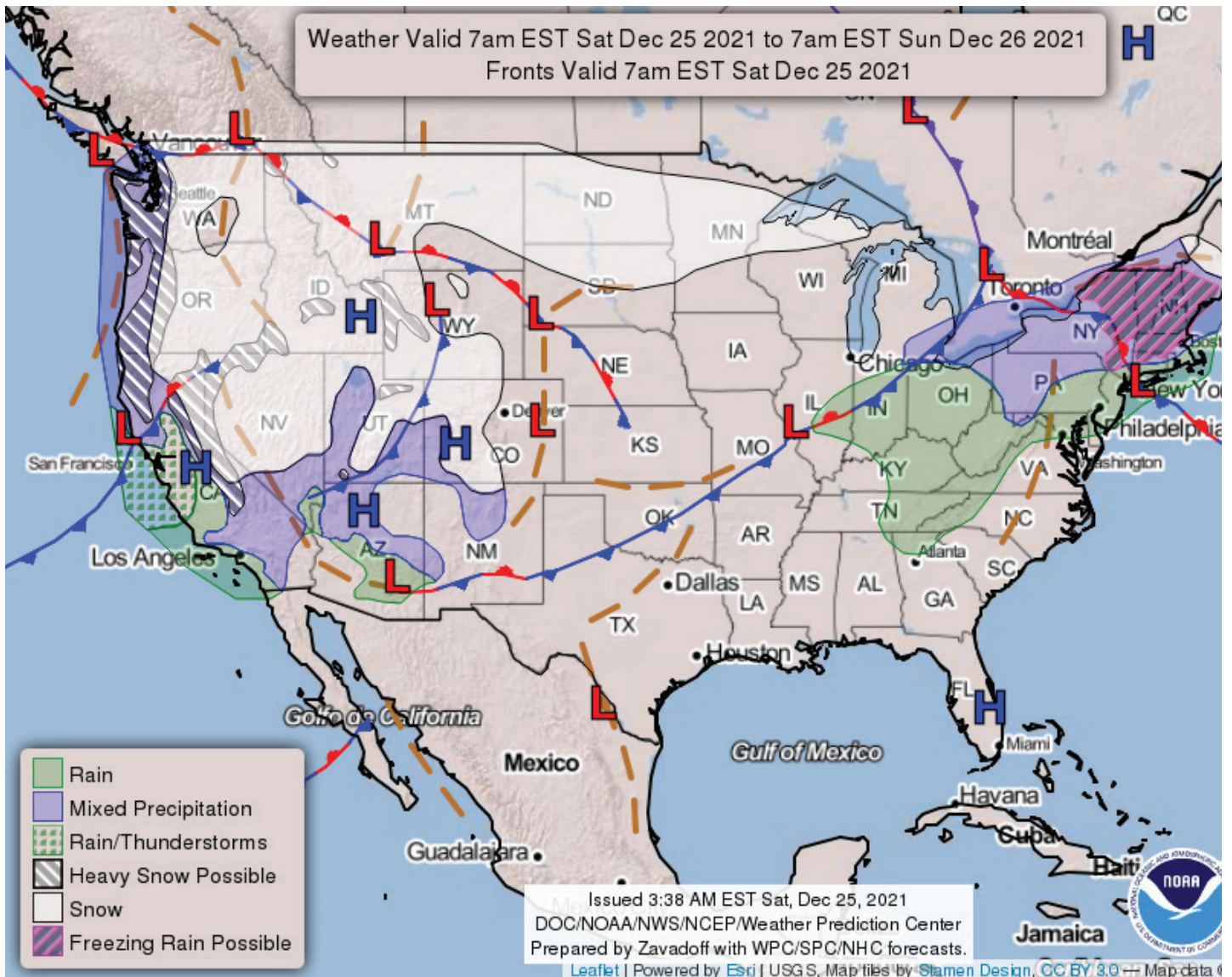
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 39.8 °F at 9:00 AM
Low Temp: 12.8 °F at 11:45 PM
Wind: 27 mph at 12:30 AM
Precip: 0.00

Record High: 56° in 1907
Record Low: -25° in 1996
Average High: 26°F
Average Low: 5°F
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.48
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.47
Average Precip to date: 21.69
Precip Year to Date: 20.03
Sunset Tonight: 4:56:08 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:09:34 AM





THE BIRTH OF JESUS

"And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. She gave birth to her first child, a son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger because there was no lodging available for them.

"That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger."

Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others - the armies of heaven - praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.'

'When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go to Bethlehem! Let's see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.

'They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger."

Prayer: We lift our hearts in praise this day, Lord of Life, for the birth of Your Son, our Savior. Our minds cannot comprehend, nor our hearts contain, the generosity of Your love, mercy, grace, love, and hope that we have because of the gift of Your one and only Son. Fill our hearts with unending gratitude for Your salvation. In Jesus Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Luke 2:6-16 I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger."

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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

Nonprofit gives away bikes so people can peddle to work

By TANYA MANUS Rapid City Journal

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — For nearly six years, Mike's Bikes: Rides That Matter has provided bicycles to people who lack transportation, and the nonprofit ministry continually has a waiting list. Currently, about 50 people are waiting for bikes to help them become self-sufficient.

Roberta Harmon launched the nonprofit in 2016. Mike's Bikes strives to fill a gap in Rapid City for people without transportation. The organization is named in honor of Mike English, a volunteer who rebuilds and repairs bikes and who helped Harmon launch Mike's Bikes.

"Food, shelter and clothing are basic needs but you don't get those things without employment," Harmon said. "Public transportation doesn't always get people there in a timely matter."

RapidRide buses run during the day, but people whose jobs require them to work after 6 p.m. or on Sundays especially need alternate transportation, the Rapid City Journal reported.

"You can cross town in about 20 minutes (on a bike)," Harmon said, noting that bike paths can be helpful to those who bike to and from work, appointments and errands. "We like to set people up for success and self-sufficiency."

Mike's Bikes gives bikes to people who have verified employment. For those who don't yet have a job, Mike's Bikes requires sweat equity. Harmon and a team of five volunteers will work side by side with a person in need of a bike. People can learn how to build and repair their own bikes, change tires and patch tire tubes.

In addition to bicycles, Mike's Bikes provides lights for safer travel when it's dark, plus chains and locks so people can secure their bikes when they're not in use. Mike's Bikes does not sell bikes or bike parts.

"(This nonprofit) came out of a need. We don't sell anything," Harmon said.

Earlier this year, Mike's Bikes found a home in the basement of the Hope Center in downtown Rapid City. Hope Center Executive Director Melanie Timm said the center had tried unsuccessfully to launch its own bike program or have other volunteers run a bike program. Teaming up with Mike's Bikes: Rides That Matter was a perfect fit for both organizations, she said.

"It has been a wonderful partnership," Timm said. "Bikes are an ongoing need. We would have people on a weekly basis ask us if we knew how they could get a bike."

"When Roberta approached us, we did not have an active bike program. We didn't have anyone with the skills or time to implement that. ... The timing was perfect. It's worked out wonderfully for her and for us and definitely for the people we serve," Timm said. "We have several Hope Center guests who volunteer and provide their assistance. They also work on their own bikes."

Every Thursday from noon to 4 p.m., Harmon, volunteers and people in need of bikes gather there to build or refurbish bikes. They use bikes, "bike carcasses" and bike parts purchased at rummage sales and even foraged from dumpsters. This fall, Mike's Bikes began teaming up with the Rapid City Police Department, which has given the nonprofit some bikes, Harmon said.

"We would love an e-bike if anybody wants to donate to us. We'll use it as an incentive for folks," she said. "We want them to say employed and move forward. ... We support good habits. We're not a handout."

Timm said although a few people have tested the boundaries, the majority of people who receive bicycles from Mike's Bikes willingly abide by the program's guidelines.

"Roberta holds them accountable. She makes it very clear, 'You will use this bike to further your life,' and if you take it to the pawn shop, that's not a bridge you want to burn," Timm said. "She holds people's feet to the fire and they respect and appreciate that."

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SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Mega Millions

16-17-25-36-37, Mega Ball: 16, Megaplier: 2

(sixteen, seventeen, twenty-five, thirty-six, thirty-seven; Mega Ball: sixteen; Megaplier: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$187 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$400 million

Space telescope launched on daring quest to behold 1st stars

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

The world's largest and most powerful space telescope rocketed away Saturday on a high-stakes quest to behold light from the first stars and galaxies and scour the universe for hints of life.

NASA's James Webb Space Telescope soared from French Guiana on South America's northeastern coast, riding a European Ariane rocket into the Christmas morning sky.

The \$10 billion observatory hurtled toward its destination 1 million miles (1.6 million kilometers) away, or more than four times beyond the moon. It will take a month to get there and another five months before its infrared eyes are ready to start scanning the cosmos.

First, the telescope's enormous mirror and sunshield need to unfurl; they were folded origami-style to fit into the rocket's nose cone. Otherwise, the observatory won't be able to peer back in time 13.7 billion years as anticipated, within a mere 100 million years of the universe-forming Big Bang.

"It's going to give us a better understanding of our universe and our place in it: who we are, what we are, the search that's eternal," NASA Administrator Bill Nelson said earlier this week.

But he cautioned: "When you want a big reward, you have to usually take a big risk."

Intended as a successor to the aging Hubble Space Telescope, the long-delayed James Webb is named after NASA's administrator during the 1960s. NASA partnered with the European and Canadian space agencies to build and launch the new 7-ton telescope, with thousands of people from 29 countries working on it since the 1990s.

With the launch falling on Christmas and a global surge in COVID-19 cases, there were fewer spectators at the French Guiana launch site than expected. Nelson bowed out along with a congressional delegation and many contractors who worked on the telescope.

Around the world, astronomers had eagerly waited to see Webb finally taking flight after years of setbacks. Last-minute technical snags bumped the launch nearly a week, then gusty wind pushed it to Christmas. Inside Launch Control, there was a smattering of Santa hats.

"We launch for humanity this morning," Arianespace CEO Stephane Israel said minutes before liftoff. "After Webb, we will never see the skies in quite the same way."

The telescope's showpiece: a gold-plated mirror more than 21 feet (6.5 meters) across.

Protecting the observatory is a wispy, five-layered sunshield, vital for keeping the light-gathering mirror and heat-sensing infrared detectors at subzero temperatures. At 70 feet by 46 feet (21 meters by 14 meters), it's the size of a tennis court.

If all goes well, the sunshield will be opened three days after liftoff, taking at least five days to unfold and lock into place. Next, the mirror segments should open up like the leaves of a drop-leaf table, 12 days or so into the flight.

In all, hundreds of release mechanisms need to work — perfectly — in order for the telescope to succeed. "Like nothing we've done before," said NASA program director Greg Robinson.

Retired astronaut-astronomer Steven Hawley is more stressed over Webb than he was for Hubble, which he released into orbit from space shuttle Discovery in 1990. That's because Webb will be too far away for rescuing, as was necessary when Hubble turned out to have blurry vision from a defective mirror.

Spacewalking repairs by astronauts transformed Hubble into a beloved marvel that has revolutionized humanity's understanding of the universe, casting its eyes as far back as 13.4 billion years. It's now up to Webb to draw even closer to the Big Bang 13.8 billion years ago, its infrared vision keener and more far-reaching than Hubble's is in the shorter visible and ultraviolet wavelengths.

NASA is shooting for 10 years of operational life from Webb. Engineers deliberately left the fuel tank accessible for a top-off by visiting spacecraft, if and when such technology becomes available.

When he released Hubble, "I never would have believed that it would still be going strong almost 32 years later," Hawley, now professor emeritus at the University of Kansas, said in an email. "I hope that in 32 years we'll be able to say that JWST did as well."

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.

Report: Women, children among dozens killed in Myanmar

BANGKOK (AP) — Myanmar government troops rounded up villagers, some believed to be women and children, fatally shot more than 30 and set the bodies on fire, a witness and other reports said Saturday.

The purported photos of the aftermath of the Christmas Eve massacre in eastern Mo So village, just outside Hpruso township in Kayah state where refugees were sheltering from an army offensive, spread on social media in the country, fueling outrage against the military that took power in February.

The accounts could not be independently verified. The photos showed the charred bodies of over 30 people in three burned-out vehicles.

A villager who said he went to the scene told The Associated Press that the victims had fled the fighting between armed resistance groups and Myanmar's army near Koi Ngan village, which is just beside Mo So, on Friday. He said they were killed after they were arrested by troops while heading to refugee camps in the western part of the township.

The government has not commented on the allegations, but a report in the state-run Myanmar Alinn daily newspaper on Saturday said that the fighting near Mo So broke out on Friday when members of ethnic guerrilla forces, known as the Karenni National Progressive Party, and those opposed to the military drove in "suspicious" vehicles and attacked security forces after refusing to stop.

The newspaper report said they included new members who were going to attend training to fight the army, and that the seven vehicles they were traveling in were destroyed in a fire. It gave no further details about the killings.

The witness who spoke to the AP said the remains were burned beyond recognition, and children's and women's clothes were found together with medical supplies and food.

"The bodies were tied with ropes before being set on fire," said the witness, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he feared for his safety.

He did not see the moment they were killed, but said he believed some of them were Mo So villagers who reportedly got arrested by troops on Friday. He denied that those captured were members of locally organized militia groups.

Myanmar's independent media reported on Friday that 10 Mo So villagers including children were arrested by the army and four members of the local paramilitary Border Guard Forces who went to negotiate for their release were reportedly tied up and shot in the head by the military.

The witness said the villagers and anti-government militia groups left the bodies as military troops arrived near Mo So while the bodies were being prepared for cremation. The fighting was still intense near the village.

"It's a heinous crime and the worst incident during Christmas. We strongly condemn that massacre as a crime against humanity," said Banyar Khun Aung, director of the Karenni Human Rights Group.

Earlier this month, government troops were also accused of rounding up villagers, some believed to be children, tying them up and slaughtering them. An opposition leader, Dr. Sasa, who uses only one name,

said the civilians were burned alive.

A video of the aftermath of the Dec. 7 assault — apparently retaliation for an attack on a military convoy — showed the charred bodies of 11 people lying in a circle amid what appeared to be the remains of a hut.

Fighting meanwhile resumed Saturday in a neighboring state on the border with Thailand, where thousands of people have fled to seek shelter. Local officials said Myanmar's military unleashed airstrikes and heavy artillery on Lay Kay Kaw, a small town controlled by ethnic Karen guerrillas, since Friday.

The military's action prompted multiple Western governments including the U.S. Embassy to issue a joint statement condemning "serious human rights violations committed by the military regime across the country."

"We call on the regime to immediately cease its indiscriminate attacks in Karen state and throughout the country, and to ensure the safety of all civilians in line with international law," the joint statement said.

Sudanese rally in new anti-coup protests amid tight security

By SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — Sudanese security forces fired tear gas to disperse protesters in Khartoum on Saturday as demonstrators once again took to the streets in the country's capital and elsewhere to denounce the October military coup.

Thousands rallied since earlier in the day, even as authorities tightened security across Khartoum, deploying troops and closing all bridges over the Nile River linking the capital with its twin city of Omdurman and the district of Bahri, the state-run SUNA news agency reported.

Authorities had warned protesters against approaching "sovereign and strategic" sites in central Khartoum — a reference to main government buildings and key institutions. The city's Security Committee said Sudanese forces would "deal with chaos and violations," SUNA had reported.

The marches started in different locations, from where the protesters meant to converge on the presidential palace. Security forces used tear gas to disperse those attempting to approach the palace, said activist Nazim Sirag. There were no immediate reports of injuries.

Rallies were also underway in other cities, including Wad Madani and Atbara.

Last weekend, security forces violently dispersed demonstrators when they attempted to stage a sit-in near the presidential palace. At least three protesters were killed, and more than 300 were wounded on Sunday. There were also allegations of sexual violence, including rape and gang rape by security forces against female protesters, according to the United Nations.

Volker Perthes, the U.N. special envoy for Sudan, urged security forces to "protect" the planned protests, and refrain from arresting people for simply wanting to take part in the demonstrations.

"Freedom of expression is a human right. This includes full access to the internet. No one should be arrested for his or her intention to protest peacefully," he said in a Twitter post.

Ahead of the demonstrations Saturday, activists reported disruption of internet access on phones in Khartoum, a tactic that had been used by the generals when they seized power on Oct. 25.

Advocacy group NetBlocks said Sudan was experiencing mobile internet disruptions early Saturday. "The mechanism appears similar or identical to that used during the October post-coup blackout," Alp Toker, the group's director, told The Associated Press.

The government did not comment on the disruptions.

The October military takeover upended a fragile planned transition to democratic rule and led to relentless street demonstrations across Sudan. At least 47 people were killed and hundreds wounded in protests triggered by the coup, according to a tally by a Sudanese medical group.

Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, a former U.N. official seen as the civilian face of Sudan's transitional government, was reinstated last month amid international pressure in a deal that calls for an independent technocratic Cabinet under military oversight led by him.

That deal, however, was rejected by the pro-democracy movement, which insists that power be handed over to a fully civilian government tasked with leading the transition.

The prime minister is continuing discussions on finding a way out of the political deadlock. He met Friday with leaders of the country's largest Umma Party, his office said.

On Christmas, pope prays for pandemic's end, peace dialogues

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Pope Francis prayed Saturday for an end to the coronavirus pandemic, using his Christmas Day address to urge health care for all, vaccines for the poor and for dialogue to prevail in resolving the world's conflicts.

Amid a record-setting rise in COVID-19 cases in Italy this week, only a few thousand people flocked to a rain-soaked St. Peter's Square for Francis' annual "Urbi et Orbi" ("To the city and the world") Christmas address. Normally, the square would be packed with tens of thousands of holiday well-wishers.

At least they could gather this year. Italy's 2020 holiday lockdown forced Francis to deliver a televised address from inside the Apostolic Palace to prevent crowds from forming in the square. Although Italy this week counted more than 50,000 cases in a single day for the first time, the government has not ordered another lockdown.

The pope's Christmas Day speech gives him an opportunity to draw a global audience's attention to conflicts big and small. This year was no different. Francis lamented ongoing conflicts in Syria, Yemen and Iraq, newly flaring tensions in Ukraine and Ethiopia, and an "unprecedented crisis" in Lebanon.

"We have become so used to them (conflicts) that immense tragedies are now being passed over in silence; we risk not hearing the cry of pain and distress of so many of our brothers and sisters," he said from the loggia of St. Peter's Basilica as Swiss Guards stood at attention in the square below.

Francis warned of the pandemic tendency to withdraw and isolate, urging instead dialogue to try to resolve the world conflicts. He prayed in particular for those most affected by the virus, including women and children who have suffered increased abuse during lockdowns.

"Son of God, comfort the victims of violence against women, which has increased in this time of pandemic. Offer hope to young children and adolescents suffering from bullying and abuse," he said.

He prayed for "consolation and warmth" for older adults who are alone, as well as for health care workers who "generously devote themselves" to caring for the sick.

"Grant health to the infirm and inspire all men and women of good will to seek the best ways possible to overcome the current health crisis and its effects," he said. "Open hearts to ensure that necessary medical care – and vaccines in particular – are provided to those peoples who need them most."

Francis delivered his speech hours after celebrating a "Midnight Mass" service for some 2,000 people, a fraction of the basilica's capacity. The service actually began at 7:30 p.m., a nod to the 85-year-old pope's endurance and a hold-over from last year, when the service had to end before Italy's nationwide COVID-19 curfew.

For the second day in a row, Italy on Friday set a daily pandemic record with 50,599 new cases. Another 141 people died, bringing Italy's official death toll in the pandemic to 136,386.

With the arrival of the omicron variant in Italy, the Vatican secretary of state this week imposed a new vaccine mandate on Vatican staff, extending it to all employees except those who have recovered from COVID-19.

Previously, only employees who dealt with the public directly had to be vaccinated, such as the staff of the Vatican Museums and the Swiss Guards. Other Vatican employees could access their offices with regular testing. Now, there is no test-out exemption.

COVID Christmas in French ICU: Fear, fatigue and loving care

By DANIEL COLE Associated Press

MARSEILLE, France (AP) — From the intensive care ward in France where he is spending the holidays, COVID-19 patient David Daniel Sebbagh said he has one overriding regret: that he didn't get vaccinated.

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"The vaccine, it's not a danger," the 52-year-old said as he lay in a Marseille hospital. "It's choosing life."

The ICU's chief doctor, Dr. Julien Carvelli, is trying to keep his team motivated as they spend another Christmas tending to patients on breathing machines, periodically flipping them back to front, front to back.

The staff is tired, the omicron variant is bearing down, and the unit's beds are filling fast. "We're afraid we won't have enough space," Carvelli said.

Marseille's La Timone Hospital, one of France's biggest hospitals, has weathered wave after wave of COVID-19. On Christmas Eve, medical personnel decorated a fir tree in the corridor and seized a moment for a communal meal in their scrubs, trying to maintain a semblance of holiday spirit in between rounds.

The hospital allows families to visit gravely ill loved ones in the ICU, as long as they're careful. Amelie Khayat has paid daily visits to her husband, Ludo, 41, who spent 24 days in a coma and on a breathing machine. The couple touched heads as she sat on his bed. Now strong enough to stand, he stood to give her a farewell hug.

In a nearby room, a 40-year-old patient lay unconscious near death, with her young son's winter hat placed on her belly. In another, a relative had left a Christian icon propped on a patient's tray.

Down the hall, Katy Zalinian waited anxiously to visit her cousin. She later entered his room wearing full protective gear and touched her hand lovingly to his leg.

While some 90% of French adults are vaccinated against the coronavirus and some 40% have received a booster shot, most of the COVID-19 patients in La Timone's ICU are unvaccinated.

"I regret it, a lot, a lot, a lot," patient Sebbagh said. "I let myself get caught up in things. I thought that the vaccine was not necessarily something good."

He recalled that when his COVID-19 symptoms were at their worst, "I didn't know where I was going. Nothing was clear in my head....I waited for hours and I was in pain."

Sebbagh's wife, Esther, described her terror: "Our life was shattered this week... I believed I would lose him."

He's still testing positive for the virus and says that all that matters now is trying to recover.

"If I had been vaccinated, I wouldn't have been in such a level of intensive care," he said. "The vaccine is not a danger but a possibility to escape, to avoid something more serious."

France now is seeing its highest daily infection rates of the pandemic as the omicron variant races around the country. Carvelli, the ICU chief in Marseille, worries hospitals could soon be "overwhelmed."

"We're already in a situation of tension, with very few available spaces," he said. "We're sick of this. We're always focused on doing our jobs the best way possible...but the more this goes on, the more tired people get."

Two things are making this Christmas especially challenging, Carvelli said. More and more staff members are testing positive in the current omicron surge and therefore unavailable to work. And some colleagues are leaving the profession altogether because of the strain.

"We still try to have little special moments during the workday, or night, to get together to celebrate," he said. "It's strange for the patients, too, who are deprived of Christmas."

Angela Charlton in Paris contributed.

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

Typhoon misery in Philippines, pandemic dampen Christmas joy

MANILA, Philippines (AP) — Hundreds of thousands of people in the Philippines, Asia's largest Roman Catholic nation, marked Christmas on Saturday without homes, adequate food and water, electricity and cellphone connections after a powerful typhoon left at least 375 people dead last week and devastated mostly central island provinces.

Elsewhere, New Zealanders are celebrating Christmas in the warmth of mid-summer with few restrictions, in one of the few countries in the world largely untouched by the omicron variant of COVID-19.

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Australia is marking the holiday amid a surge of COVID-19 cases, worse than at any stage of the pandemic, which has forced states to reinstate mask mandates and other measures.

And adding more pain for travelers, airlines around the world canceled hundreds of flights as the omicron variant jumbled schedules and drew down staffing levels.

According to FlightAware, there are more than 3,900 canceled flights on Friday and Saturday, with close to half of the cancellations by Chinese airlines. About 30% of affected flights — more than 1,100 — were to, from or within the U.S. This is still a small fraction of global flights. FlightAware says it has tracked more than 100,000 arrivals in the past 24 hours.

Before Typhoon Rai hit on Dec. 16, millions of Filipinos were trooping back to shopping malls, public parks and churches after an alarming spike in infections in September eased considerably.

Gov. Arthur Yap of hard-hit Bohol province, where more than 100 people died in the typhoon and about 150,000 houses were damaged or destroyed, asked foreign aid agencies on Saturday to help provide temporary shelters and water-filtration systems to supplement Philippine government aid.

"I refuse to believe that there's no Christmas spirit today among our people. They're conservative Catholics. But it's obviously very muted. There is overwhelming fear, there are no gifts, there were no Christmas Eve dinners, there is none of that today," Yap told The Associated Press.

Yap said he was happy that many Filipinos could celebrate Christmas more safely after COVID-19 cases dropped, but he pleaded: "Please don't forget us."

In Manila, which was not hit by the typhoon, Filipino Catholics were relieved to be able to return to churches on Christmas, although only a fraction were allowed inside and worshippers were required to wear masks and stand at a safe distance from each other.

In South Korea, tough social distancing rules remained in place, requiring churches to allow only a limited number of worshippers — 70% of their seating capacity — and attendees had to be fully vaccinated.

In Seoul's Yoido Full Gospel Church, the country's biggest Protestant church, thousands of masked worshippers sang hymns and prayed as the service was broadcast online. Many churches across the country offered both in-person and online services.

South Korea has been grappling with soaring infections and deaths since it significantly eased its virus curbs in early November as part of efforts to return to pre-pandemic normalcy. The country was eventually forced to restore its toughest distancing guidelines, such as a four-person limit on social gatherings and a 9 p.m. curfew for restaurants and cafes.

Christmas celebrations were subdued in much of India, with more decorations than crowds as people feared a new wave of the omicron variant potentially sweeping the country in the coming weeks.

Authorities reintroduced nighttime curfews and restrictions on gatherings of more than five people in big cities like New Delhi and Mumbai. People attended midnight Mass in Mumbai and elsewhere but in smaller numbers.

Christians comprise just over 2% of India's nearly 1.4 billion people.

In New Zealand, where 95% of adults have had at least one dose of the vaccine, making it one of the world's most vaccinated populations, the only omicron cases that have been found have been safely contained at the border.

As the pandemic spread around the world the past two years, New Zealand used its isolation to its advantage. Border controls kept the worst of the virus at bay. By Christmas this year, New Zealand had recorded 50 deaths in a population of 5.5 million.

But that success has come at a cost. There were empty chairs at some tables this holiday season because some New Zealanders living and working overseas were not able to return home due to limits in the country's managed isolation and quarantine program.

The traditional dining tables of a northern winter — turkey and all the trimmings — are common. But Kiwis also celebrate in an antipodean manner, with barbecues on beaches fringed by the native pohutukawa tree, which blooms only at Christmas.

At New Zealand's Scott Base in Antarctica, some New Zealanders enjoyed a white Christmas. During

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summer on the frozen continent, the sun never dips below the horizon and in 24 hours of daylight the temperature hovers around 0 degrees Celsius (32 degrees Fahrenheit).

Around 200 people pass through the base over the summer season — scientists, support staff and defense personnel who provide communications and other services. Numbers are lower this year because of the pandemic and all staff traveling to the continent have had to isolate and undergo COVID-19 testing before departure.

Most Pacific Island nations whose health systems might have been overwhelmed by COVID-19 outbreaks have largely managed to keep out the virus through strict border controls and high vaccination numbers.

Fiji has an ongoing outbreak and has had almost 700 deaths. About 92% of the adult population is now fully vaccinated, 97.7% have received at least one dose and many in the deeply religious nation will celebrate Christmas at traditional church services and family gatherings.

Health Secretary James Fong, in a Christmas message, urged Fijians to “please celebrate wisely.”

In remote Macuata province, residents of four villages received a special Christmas gift: Electricity was connected to their villages for the first time.

In his Christmas message, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison referred to the COVID-19 toll.

“This pandemic, it continues to buffet us,” Morrison said. “The omicron variant is just the latest challenge that we have faced. But together, always together and only together, we keep pushing through.”

The omicron variant is prevalent in some states and is estimated to represent more than 70% of all new cases in Queensland.

Summer heat might have discouraged outdoor Christmas feasts in some places. The temperature in Perth in Western Australia was expected to hit 42 degrees Celsius on Saturday, making it the hottest Christmas since records began more than a century ago.

On Christmas Eve, a student driver in the Northern Territory made off with a truck containing more than \$10,000 in Christmas hams that was empty when it was found.

“This behavior can only be described as Grinch-like,” police detective Mark Bland said.

Associated Press journalists Jim Gomez, Aaron Favila and Joeal Calupitan in Manila, Philippines; Hyung-jin Kim in Seoul, South Korea; Ashok Sharma in New Delhi; and Steve McMorran in Sydney contributed to this report.

Gorbachev's resignation 30 years ago marked the end of USSR

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — People strolling across Moscow's snowy Red Square on the evening of Dec. 25, 1991 were surprised to witness one of the 20th century's most pivotal moments — the Soviet red flag over the Kremlin pulled down and replaced with the Russian Federation's tricolor.

Just minutes earlier, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev announced his resignation in a live televised address to the nation, concluding 74 years of Soviet history.

In his memoirs, Gorbachev, now 90, bitterly lamented his failure to prevent the USSR's demise, an event that upset the world's balance of power and sowed the seeds of an ongoing tug-of-war between Russia and neighboring Ukraine.

“I still regret that I failed to bring the ship under my command to calm waters, failed to complete reforming the country,” Gorbachev wrote.

Political experts argue to this day whether he could have held onto his position and saved the USSR. Some charge that Gorbachev, who came to power in 1985, could have prevented the Soviet breakup if he had moved more resolutely to modernize the anemic state-controlled economy while keeping tighter controls on the political system.

“The collapse of the Soviet Union was one of those occasions in history that are believed to be unthinkable until they become inevitable,” Dmitri Trenin, the director of the Moscow Carnegie Center, told The Associated Press. “The Soviet Union, whatever its long-term chances were, was not destined to go down

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when it did.”

By the fall of 1991, however, deepening economic woes and secessionist bids by Soviet republics had made the collapse all but certain. A failed August 1991 coup by the Communist old guard provided a major catalyst, dramatically eroding Gorbachev’s authority and encouraging more Soviet republics to seek independence.

While Gorbachev desperately tried to negotiate a new “union treaty” between the republics to preserve the USSR, he faced stiff resistance from his arch-rival, Russian Federation leader Boris Yeltsin, who was eager to take over the Kremlin and had backing from other independent-minded heads of Soviet republics.

On Dec. 8, the leaders of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus met in a hunting lodge, declaring the USSR dead and announcing the creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States. Two weeks later, eight other Soviet republics joined the newly formed alliance, handing Gorbachev a stark choice: step down or try to avert the country’s breakup by force.

The Soviet leader analyzed the tough dilemma in his memoirs, noting that an attempt to order the arrest of the republics’ leaders could have resulted in a bloodbath amid split loyalties in the military and law enforcement agencies.

“If I had decided to rely on some part of the armed structures, it would have inevitably triggered an acute political conflict fraught with blood and far-reaching negative consequences,” Gorbachev wrote. “I couldn’t do that: I would have stopped being myself.”

What would have happened had Gorbachev resorted to force is hard to imagine in retrospect, the Carnegie Center’s Trenin observed..

“It might have unleashed bloody events in Moscow and across Russia, maybe across the Soviet Union, or it might have consolidated some things,” he said. “Had he decided to go down that route...there would have been blood on his hands. He would have had to turn into a sort of a dictator, because that would have...done away with his most important element of legacy; that is, not using force in a massive way.”

When the leaders of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine declared the Soviet Union defunct, they didn’t pay much attention to what would happen to the 4-million-strong Soviet military and its massive nuclear arsenals.

After the Soviet collapse, it took years of U.S.-led diplomatic efforts to persuade Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan to hand over to Russia the Soviet nuclear weapons left on their territories — a process finally completed in 1996.

“The leaders of the republics that announced the end of the Soviet Union in December 1991 did not think through all the consequences of what they were doing,” Gorbachev’s aide, Pavel Palazhchenko, told the AP.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, whose two decades at the helm is longer than Gorbachev and Yeltsin’s tenures combined, has famously described the Soviet collapse as “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century.”

“The breakup of the Soviet Union was the collapse of a historic Russia,” Putin said in a documentary that aired this month on Russian state television. “We lost 40% of the territory, production capacities and population. We became a different country. What had been built over a millennium was lost to a large extent.”

The Kremlin moved to redraw the post-Soviet borders in 2014, responding to the ouster of Ukraine’s former Moscow-friendly leader by annexing the Ukrainian Crimean Peninsula and throwing its weight behind separatist rebels in its neighbor’s east.

More than seven years of fighting in Ukraine’s eastern industrial heartland has killed over 14,000 people. Tensions flared up in recent weeks over a Russian troop buildup near Ukraine that fueled Western fears of an invasion.

Moscow has denied plans for an offensive and sternly urged the U.S. and its allies to provide a binding pledge that NATO wouldn’t expand to Ukraine or deploy weapons there — a demand rejected by the West.

Putin and his officials countered the Western argument that Russia doesn’t have a say in the alliance’s expansion by emphasizing the country’s right to protect its core security interests.

“Russia has never pretended to have the right of vote to make decisions for other countries,” Konstantin Kosachev, a deputy speaker of the upper house of Russian parliament, told the AP. “But we have an ab-

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solute right of vote to ensure our own interests and security, and to offer our vision of a security environment in the nearby regions.”

While Putin has repeatedly denied intentions to rebuild the USSR, he has described Russians and Ukrainians as “one people” over angry protests from Kyiv and charged that Ukraine unfairly inherited historic parts of Russia in the Soviet demise.

The Russian leader further toughened his rhetoric Thursday amid spiraling tensions with the West, blaming Soviet founder Vladimir Lenin for handing Russian lands to Ukraine to “create a country that had never existed before.”

Harriet Morris, Tanya Titova and Anna Frants contributed to this report.

Water worries in West force sports teams to get creative

By ERICA HUNZINGER AP Sports Writer

DENVER (AP) — The Arizona Diamondbacks ripped out the grass at Chase Field ahead of the 2019 season, replacing it with synthetic grass. It was a business decision, but it also ended up being a water-conservation measure.

The Phoenix-based major league baseball team thought it would save 2 million gallons a year. In the first season, the savings were closer to 4.5 million gallons, which is roughly the annual water usage of 49 households in the Phoenix area, according to the Arizona Department of Water Resources.

“This challenge has been approaching for years and has been on our radar,” said Diamondbacks President and CEO Derrick Hall, whose team has saved 16 million gallons of water since the turf was installed. “We have tremendous relationships with the state’s legislators and executives, and have had discussions about water for years.”

That’s not to say the Diamondbacks don’t use water, none of which is recycled or reclaimed. There are hundreds of low-flow toilets, urinals and sinks, plus the outfield pool and the need to hose down seats or wash uniforms.

With scientists predicting that climate change will lead to droughts and possible water shortages throughout the West in the coming years, The Associated Press asked pro teams in the Colorado River Basin who have grass or ice playing surfaces about use and sustainability strategies. Of the four interviewed, three rely mostly on reclaimed, recycled or created water and two have high-tech irrigation sensors. Not one has a detailed plan for current or future drought situations.

Regardless of their strategies, pro teams’ usage is “probably negligible or immaterial, in terms of the impact” on water sustainability, said Sarah Porter, director of the Kyl Center for Water Policy at Arizona State University. She’s more concerned about sports’ “moral leadership.”

When “players help take the lead and emphasize the importance of sustainability, that can have an impact,” she said, “because that helps move everybody into the kind of new math that we have to move into as we deal with declining Colorado River supplies and changes in the amount of snowpack we get from our other big water sources.”

The authors of the 1922 Colorado River Compact couldn’t have imagined what the West would look like a century later, when about 40 million people and millions of agricultural acres rely on the 1,450-mile-long waterway. That high demand is running up against a rapidly warming climate, one scientists believe will cause a more unpredictable amount of water that could lead to droughts and lower reservoir levels.

Arizona, Nevada and Mexico must cut back on usage in 2022 because of low water levels at Lake Mead, though the restrictions mostly affect agricultural areas; Las Vegas and Phoenix are spared for now. California had a statewide drought declaration this year, and the State Water Resources Control Board is considering new water-use rules for homeowners.

But water is barely mentioned in September’s inaugural Sustainable Sport Index benchmarking report from Honeycomb Strategies, which works with venues and stadiums on sustainability. Eight of the 20 pro teams that responded were in the Colorado River Basin, though none spoke with the AP. Seventy-eight

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percent of respondents said they track water consumption annually and 64% have timed irrigation systems.

The LA Galaxy's home — the 125-acre Dignity Health Sports Park, which opened in 2003 — recently upgraded its irrigation system to better target thirsty spots. The campus uses 90% reclaimed water "to be as responsible as possible from the onset of this building," General Manager Katie Pandolfo said.

That works out to about 15 million gallons of reclaimed water a year used on the Galaxy's grass field, several other grass soccer fields and landscaping. But 90% reclaimed water isn't 100% reclaimed water, and it's "not as regulated as domestic," Pandolfo said, so another 12 million gallons a year in domestic water is used only for irrigation.

Up the coastline, Levi's Stadium, which is home to the San Francisco 49ers, uses mostly recycled water from the city and county of Santa Clara. While not in the Colorado River Basin, the area has its own problems, considering a new study projects the possibility of little or no snow in the Sierra Nevada mountain range in a few decades.

The 49ers said they'd used 8.3 million gallons of recycled water and 12.3 million gallons overall from January through the end of September. Levi's Stadium Executive Vice President and General Manager Jim Mercurio acknowledged the 82,000 square feet of grass doesn't get 100% recycled water but a blend of reclaimed and potable water.

"You never want to compromise the integrity of the field," Mercurio said.

Reclaimed, recycled, whatever you call it, Porter with the Kyl Center said it's a net positive, but "doesn't actually contribute to sustainability in the big picture."

"We have to stop thinking of it as being virtuous for people to use reclaimed water, because that water could be treated up to potable standards and used for anything," she said.

The Los Angeles Kings have an unusual source for water at the Crypto.com Arena and the Toyota Sports Performance Center practice facility. Both have an Energetico Climate Processor, which pulls humidity out of the air and turns it into water; the Kings said, combined, that saves a total of 620,500 gallons of city water a year.

It takes about 10,000 gallons to make ice at the beginning of the NHL season. On game days, the Kings use 800 to 1,200 gallons to keep the surface playable, said Kelly Cheeseman, the chief operating officer of the L.A. Kings and AEG Sports.

The first year of the climate processor system at the Crypto.com Arena, in 2018, the Kings used the majority of created water for the initial ice and maintenance. But now the 500 to 700 gallons per day goes toward the cooling towers that are part of the heating and air conditioning system (though the towers still need another 4,300 gallons a day of city water).

If teams' overall water usage is a relative drop in the bucket, then the long-term impact relies on star power, Porter said. In other words, teams can't just practice, they must preach.

The 49ers recently announced a new partnership with Save Our Water and the state's Department of Water Resources, which will involve signage at the stadium, a webpage and a PSA campaign that started this month with wide receiver Deebo Samuel.

"It's not like you're going to change (people's usage) overnight because the 49ers are doing it ... (but people might think) if the 49ers are doing it, let's try it," Mercurio said, adding pro teams have "not only an obligation, but an opportunity" to encourage water conservation.

Pandolfo said the Galaxy has "a brand that people love and, quite frankly, listen to, so we have an obligation to make sure that we are putting the message out there ... that this is something important."

Hall with the Diamondbacks said the team understands "our social responsibility when it comes to talking the talk, but more importantly, walking the walk." But Porter said teams need to go beyond the usual fix-your-leaky-faucets talk, and instead raise the idea of permanently reducing outdoor water use — like encouraging residents to get rid of a pool — or share expertise on xeriscaping.

"If one of Arizona's beloved sports teams started to lead a conversation about water use among affinity organizations," she said. "I think it would really ... create momentum."

For all of AP's environmental coverage, visit <https://apnews.com/hub/environment>

EXPLAINER: How will Biden's COVID-19 test giveaway work?

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden says the federal government will buy half a billion COVID-19 rapid test kits and distribute them free of charge to people to use at home. But despite the high public demand for tests, it will still be several more weeks before these kits are available to be shipped. The administration is still working on details for how the program will work.

DOES THE GOVERNMENT HAVE THE TESTS?

Not yet. As of this week, the departments of Defense and Health and Human Services were "executing on what's called an 'accelerated emergency contract,'" the White House press secretary, Jen Psaki, said. The contract is expected to be signed soon.

WHEN WILL THE TEST KITS BE DELIVERED?

The first delivery is expected in early January. All 500 million kits will not arrive at the same time but instead will be delivered in batches.

MY DRUGSTORE DOESN'T HAVE ANY TESTS. HOW CAN I GET A FREE KIT FROM THE GOVERNMENT?

You'll go to a new government website to request a kit, but the site won't be functional until after the first batch of test kits have been delivered, Psaki said. She said the process was being handled that way to avoid creating more confusion for the public. But the idea is that anyone who wants a test kit would log onto this website to request one.

"We're obviously not going to put the website up until there are tests available," Psaki said.

WHICH HOME TEST WILL I GET?

It's unclear. But Psaki noted that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has approved several different brands of rapid home tests that are currently on the market.

WILL I BE LIMITED TO ONE TEST OR CAN I REQUEST MULTIPLE?

To be determined, Psaki said.

WHY IS BIDEN BUYING THESE TEST KITS?

It represents an acknowledgement by the president that the administration needs to do more to increase access to COVID-19 testing, which is an important tool to help slow the spread of the coronavirus.

In cases where infected people show symptoms or not, testing is the only way to find out if they have the virus so they can avoid being out and about and potentially spreading disease.

But demand for test kits soared as the holidays neared and people grew eager to test themselves and their families before traveling and as the easily transmissible omicron variant spread rapidly in just a few weeks to become dominant strain in the U.S.

Biden's promise of 500 million test kits is in addition to the administration's earlier pledge to send 50 million rapid tests to community health centers across the country.

HOW MUCH WILL THE PROGRAM COST?

The purchase will be paid for with money from the \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief bill Biden signed into law in March, the White House said. The exact cost will be known soon.

IS THERE ANOTHER WAY TO GET A TEST KIT FOR FREE

Biden said in a speech Tuesday that, starting in January, private insurers will cover the cost of at-home testing. So people will have the option of buying tests at a store or online and then seeking reimbursement from their health insurance provider.

The government will also provide access to free at-home tests for people who may not have health insurance, Biden said.

COVID-19 makes Biden's 1st White House Christmas less merry

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

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WASHINGTON (AP) — So long eggnog, shrimp cocktail and pet-shaped sugar cookies.

It's been a less merry holiday scene at the White House this year under COVID-19's shadow. President Joe Biden and first lady Jill Biden have replaced the packed parties and overflowing buffet tables of the past with food-free open houses, face masks and testing for the unvaccinated.

Beyond the impact on Biden's first Christmas in office, the virus and its variants largely put the kibosh on the entire White House social scene for 2021, starting with an inauguration that positioned flags in place of people on the National Mall.

"I think it's been really tough on them," said Philip Dufour, who was Vice President Al Gore's social secretary. He noted that many events were not held while the president and first lady did others over Zoom.

Major social events scrubbed from the calendar included the White House ball for the nation's governors and the Easter Egg Roll, the second straight year that springtime ritual has been canceled.

The Democratic president also has yet to toast a foreign counterpart at a glitzy White House state dinner because he has yet to invite a world leader for a state visit. In fact, months passed before Biden was able to welcome a foreign leader to the Oval Office for even lower-key talks.

Still, the White House managed to pull off some events despite the pandemic, such as bill-signing and Medal of Honor ceremonies. The Bidens also hosted large receptions for Hanukkah and for artists recognized by the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

But the pandemic's biggest blow to the calendar came at Christmas, forcing the White House to overhaul its holiday entertaining — and trim the guest list.

"Anyone who knows the Bidens knows how much they enjoy hosting and celebrating the holidays," Michael LaRosa, the first lady's spokesperson, said in announcing a limited number of open houses for invited guests to ooh and aah over the Christmas trees and other decorations.

"It is disappointing that we cannot host as many people as the Bidens would like to, but as we have done since Day 1 of the Biden Administration, we will continue to implement strong COVID protocols, developed in consultation with our public health advisers," LaRosa said.

In addition to fewer people passing through for the open houses, thousands of other people didn't get a close-up look at how Jill Biden decked out White House hallways and public rooms for the holidays because public tours of the mansion remain on indefinite hold.

"The White House is never as beautiful as it is at Christmas. It's just gorgeous," said Jeremy Bernard, who oversaw holiday decorating and event planning as President Barack Obama's social secretary. "It's a shame that more people can't go through, but it's the reality of being in a pandemic."

In part to make up for the lack of access, photos and an interactive tour of the decorations were uploaded to the White House website, and the first lady tweeted video of herself describing the decor and theme in each of the rooms and public spaces.

She revived the long tradition — which had lapsed under the previous administration — of opening the executive mansion for the PBS series, "In Performance at the White House." A holiday-themed installment aired Tuesday night featuring Andrea Bocelli, Billy Porter, Norah Jones, The Jonas Brothers and others performing from different rooms in the White House.

The first lady also taped a children's tour of the White House with characters from PBS KIDS.

In pre-pandemic times, presidents and first ladies spent many December evenings in the run-up to Christmas hosting nearly two dozen holiday parties and receptions, sometimes two per day, where they stood in line for hours posing for photos with ecstatic guests.

Eggnog and adult beverages flowed freely, partygoers piled dinner plates with shrimp and cocktail sauce, and dessert tables offered cookies decorated in the image of White House dogs — some of which were slipped into purses and pockets for the trip home.

All of that was scrapped this year.

Instead, the Bidens invited groups of up to 100 people to holiday open houses, giving them half an hour — instead of the usual two — to tour the decorations on the ground and state floors. There was no food and drink. Nor was there picture-taking with the Bidens, who didn't attend.

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Guests had to attest to their vaccination status before showing up, wear a face mask at all times on the White House grounds and practice social distancing. Anyone not vaccinated had to show proof of a negative COVID-19 test taken within 48 hours of the event.

The final open houses were held this week.

Sen. Marsha Blackburn, R-Tenn., suggested on Twitter that the White House was guilty of hypocrisy with the open houses and shouldn't have held them at all.

"The Biden White House's decision to cancel their 'holiday party' and instead hold a 'holiday open house' tracks right along with the Democrats' tendency to virtue signal while simultaneously creating loopholes for themselves," Blackburn said in a written statement.

Jennifer Pickens, an event planner who wrote a book about Christmas at the White House, said holiday traditions can provide comfort and a feeling of normalcy, and argued that the White House should continue to welcome visitors during the pandemic.

Events "can be smaller in scale and done safely, but they need to continue," she said in an email. Pickens said the White House is the People's House, "so the people should be there."

Dr. Leana Wen, the former Baltimore health commissioner, said the open houses seemed safe given the safety steps required by the White House and the absence of eating and drinking.

"That's exactly the right thing to do," Wen said.

Sweet repeat: Brothers regift same hard candy for decades

MANCHESTER, N.H. (AP) — Two New Hampshire brothers have gotten their holiday regifting skills down to an art — they've been passing the same hard candy back and forth for over 30 years.

It started in 1987, when Ryan Wasson gave a 10-roll Frankford "Santa's Candy Book" with assorted fruit flavors to his brother, Eric Wasson, as a joke for Christmas, knowing that Eric wouldn't like it.

"I didn't eat them," Eric Wasson told WMUR-TV. "And so the next year I thought, 'Hey, I think I'm going to give it back to him. He'll never remember.'"

But Ryan immediately recognized it. They've been taking turns ever since, keeping a log of their exchanges. They've gotten creative about it.

Ryan Wasson told the station the candy has been frozen in a block of ice and put in Jell-O, adding, "He one time sewed it into a teddy bear."

The tradition has also involved family members, co-workers and even a sheriff's department. Last year, it was presented to Ryan Wasson on a silver platter at a restaurant.

This year, Ryan Wasson turned to a group on social media for ideas. Suggestions included having it arrive via a pizza delivery or Christmas carolers, hiding it in a book or cake, or holding a scavenger hunt with clues.

"If you ask which one has ever done the best as far as giving these, we're both going to say it's ourself, right?" Ryan Wasson said. "We're never going to give in."

Airlines cancel flights due to COVID staffing shortages

By DAVID McHUGH and TALI ARBEL Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Airlines canceled hundreds of flights as the omicron variant jumbled schedules and drew down staffing levels at some carriers during the busy holiday travel season.

Delta Air Lines and United Airlines together canceled more than 600 flights on Friday and Saturday. As of early evening Friday, Delta canceled had 149 flights on Friday and 188 for Christmas Day, according to FlightAware. (Other factors, such as weather, are also causing cancellations.) United called off 189 flights on Friday, about 10% of its schedule, and 140 on Saturday. Planned cancellations continued into Sunday.

Not all airlines said COVID was disrupting their travel schedules. American Airlines said it had "nothing to report," while Southwest Airlines said "things are running smoothly." JetBlue, which FlightAware said had canceled nearly 150 flights over Friday and Saturday, did not respond to a request for comment.

Flight delays and cancellations tied to staffing shortages have been a regular problem for the U.S. airline

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industry this year. Airlines encouraged workers to quit in 2020, when air travel collapsed, and were caught short-staffed this year as travel recovered.

"The nationwide spike in omicron cases this week has had a direct impact on our flight crews and the people who run our operation," United said in a statement. "As a result, we've unfortunately had to cancel some flights and are notifying impacted customers in advance of them coming to the airport."

Delta said it canceled flights Friday because of the impact of omicron and possibility of bad weather after it had "exhausted all options and resources — including rerouting and substitutions of aircraft and crews to cover scheduled flying."

The airlines both said they were trying to rebook passengers.

While some travelers canceled holiday plans because of rising case numbers, many others kept to their vacations during some of the year's busiest travel days. The Transportation Security Administration said it expects to screen nearly 30 million people from Dec. 20 through Jan. 3, compared with nearly 44 million during the last holiday season before the pandemic.

Germany-based Lufthansa said Friday that it was canceling a dozen long-haul transatlantic flights over the Christmas holiday period because of a "massive rise" in sick leave among pilots. The cancellations on flights to Houston, Boston and Washington come despite a "large buffer" of additional staff for the period. The airline says it couldn't speculate on whether COVID-19 infections or quarantines were responsible because it was not informed about the sort of illness. Passengers were booked on other flights.

Australian airline Jetstar said many of its workers had to test and isolate because of COVID spread, leading to last-minute delays and cancellations. It said it has rebooked the majority of passengers. FlightAware said Jetstar had 45 cancellations on Thursday and 34 on Friday.

According to FlightAware, there are more than 3,900 canceled flights on Friday and Saturday, with close to half of the cancellations by Chinese airlines. About 30% of affected flights — more than 1,100 — were to, from or within the U.S. This is still a small fraction of global flights. FlightAware says it has tracked more than 100,000 arrivals in the past 24 hours.

Coronavirus infections fueled by the new variant have also squeezed staffing at hospitals, police departments, supermarkets and other critical operations that have struggled to maintain a full contingent of front-line workers.

To ease staffing shortages, countries including Spain and the U.K. have reduced the length of COVID-19 quarantines by letting people return to work sooner after testing positive or being exposed to the virus.

Delta CEO Ed Bastian was among those who have called on the Biden administration to take similar steps or risk further disruptions in air travel. On Thursday, the U.S. shortened COVID-19 isolation rules for health care workers only.

McHugh reported from Frankfurt, Germany.

COVID puts a damper on Christmas Eve again around the world

By JACK JEFFERY, DAVID MCHUGH and BOBBY CAINA CALVAN Associated Press

From Bethlehem and Frankfurt to London and Boston, the surging coronavirus put a damper on Christmas Eve for a second year, forcing churches to cancel or scale back services and disrupting travel plans and family gatherings.

Drummers and bagpipers marched through Bethlehem to smaller than usual crowds after new Israeli travel restrictions meant to slow the highly contagious omicron variant kept international tourists away from the town where Jesus is said to have been born.

In Germany, a line wound halfway around Cologne's massive cathedral, not for midnight Mass but for vaccinations. The offer of shots was an expression of "care for one's neighbor" that was consistent with the message of Christmas, cathedral provost Guido Assmann told the DPA news agency.

Around the world, people weary from nearly two years of lockdowns and other restrictions searched for ways to safely enjoy holiday rituals.

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"We can't let the virus take our lives from us when we're healthy," said Rosalia Lopes, a retired Portuguese government worker who was doing some last-minute shopping in the coastal town of Cascais.

She said she and her family were exhausted by the pandemic and determined to go ahead with their celebrations with the help of vaccines and booster shots, rapid home tests and mask-wearing in public. She planned a traditional Portuguese Christmas Eve dinner of baked cod.

In New York City, where omicron has spread widely, people waited in long lines to get tested, many doing so as a precaution before traveling to reunite with family.

Brianna Sultan and her daughter Ava, 8, spent Friday in one of those long lines waiting for a test after they got word of another infection at school.

"It's a terrible way to be spending Christmas Eve," Sultan said after more than two hours in line and as the chill deepened into the evening in New York City's Harlem neighborhood. "It's terrible that we can't see our families because this COVID strain is coming back up again."

Holiday travel was dealt a blow when major airlines canceled hundreds of flights amid staffing shortages largely tied to omicron.

Sadia Reins arrived in New York City from Alexandria, Virginia, on Friday to be with her 75-year-old mother. Reins said the two haven't spent Christmas together in two years, and despite the risks in traveling during the outbreak, she couldn't bear to be apart from her mother again this year.

"We're going to cry," she said, adding: "We talk on the phone all the time, but it's not the same as looking at someone."

In Britain, where the coronavirus variant is ripping through the population, some houses of worship hoped to press on.

At St. Paul's Old Ford, an Anglican church in East London, priests planned to hold services on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. But to protect parishioners, the church called off its Nativity play.

"You might have to cancel the service, but you can't cancel Christmas," said the Rev. April Keech, an associate priest. "You can't stop love. Love still stands."

Numerous churches in the U.S. canceled in-person services, including Washington National Cathedral in the nation's capital and historic Old South Church in Boston. Others planned outdoor celebrations or a mix of online and in-person worship.

In Rome, a maskless Pope Francis celebrated Christmas Eve Mass before an estimated 2,000 people in St. Peter's Basilica, where admission was limited and worshippers had to wear masks.

While the number of faithful was far more than the 200 allowed in last year, it was a fraction of the 20,000 the basilica can seat. Before the pandemic, St. Peter's was routinely packed for midnight Mass.

In Germany, churchgoers faced a thicket of health restrictions and limits on attendance. Some had to show proof of vaccination or testing.

Frankfurt's cathedral, which can hold 1,200 people, offered only 137 socially distanced spaces, all of which were booked days in advance. Singing was allowed only through masks.

People in the Netherlands tried to make the best of the holiday, despite living under one of the strictest lockdowns in Europe. All nonessential shops were closed, including bars and restaurants, and home visits were limited to two people per day, four on Christmas.

"We are just meeting with some small groups of family for the next few days," Marloes Jansen, who was waiting in line to buy the traditional Dutch kerststol, a Christmas bread with fruits and nuts.

A glitch in a computerized appointment system prevented scores of people from scheduling COVID-19 tests and undermined the government's efforts to administer booster shots in a country already lagging far behind its neighbors.

In France, some visited loved ones in the hospital. In the Mediterranean city of Marseille, the intensive care unit at La Timone Hospital has been taking in more and more COVID-19 patients in recent days.

Amelie Khayat has been paying daily visits to her husband, Ludo, 41, who is recovering from spending 24 days in a coma and on a breathing machine.

They touched their heads together as she sat on his bed, and now that he is strong enough to stand,

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he got up to give her a farewell hug, as a medical worker put final decorations on the ICU Christmas tree.

Parisians lined up at chocolate shops, farmers' markets and testing centers. France has posted record numbers of daily COVID-19 infections, and hospitalizations have been rising, but the government has held off on imposing curfews or closings during the holidays.

"It does affect our enthusiasm to celebrate Christmas. It does makes us a bit sad. But at least we are sure not to contaminate or get contaminated. We will all do the test in our family," said Fabienne Maksimovic, 55, as she waited in line at a pharmacy in Paris to get tested.

In Antwerp, Belgium, Christmas trees hung upside down from windows in a protest against the closing of cultural venues.

In Bethlehem, the scene was much more festive than it was a year ago, when musicians marched through empty streets. This year, hundreds of people gathered in Manger Square as bagpipe-and-drum units streamed through.

Before the pandemic, Bethlehem would host thousands of Christian pilgrims from around the world. The lack of visitors has hit the city's hotels, restaurants and gift shops especially hard.

Associated Press journalists Nicole Winfield in Rome; Danica Kirka in London; Barry Hatton in Lisbon, Portugal; Aritz Parra in Madrid; Daniel Cole in Marseille, France; Molly Quell in the Netherlands; and David Cray in New York contributed to this report.

Pope celebrates Christmas Eve Mass as virus surges in Italy

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Pope Francis celebrated Christmas Eve Mass before an estimated 2,000 people in St. Peter's Basilica on Friday, going ahead with the service despite the resurgence in COVID-19 cases that has prompted a new vaccine mandate for Vatican employees.

A maskless Francis processed down the central aisle as the Sistine Chapel choir sang "Noel," kicking off the Vatican's Christmas holiday that commemorates the birth of Jesus in a manger in Bethlehem. He remained maskless throughout the service.

In his homily, Francis urged the faithful to focus on the "littleness" of Jesus, and remember that he came into the world poor, without even a proper crib.

"That is where God is, in littleness," Francis said. "This is the message: God does not rise up in grandeur, but lowers himself into littleness. Littleness is the path that he chose to draw near to us, to touch our hearts, to save us and to bring us back to what really matters."

Attendance on Friday was limited to about 2,000 people, far more than the 200 allowed in 2020 when Italy was in a full Christmas lockdown. But the number is a fraction of the capacity of St. Peter's, which can seat up to 20,000 and in pre-pandemic times would be packed for one of the most popular Vatican liturgies of the year.

The "Midnight Mass" actually began at 7:30 p.m., a nod to the 85-year-old pope's endurance and a hold-over from last year, when the service had to end before Italy's nationwide COVID-19 curfew.

No curfew is in place this year, but cases this week have surged even beyond 2020 levels. For the second day in a row, Italy on Friday set a new pandemic daily record with 50,599 new cases. Another 141 people died, bringing Italy's official death toll to 136,386.

With the arrival of the omicron variant in Italy, the Vatican secretary of state on Thursday imposed a new vaccine mandate on all Vatican staff, extending it to all employees except those who have recovered from the coronavirus. Previously, only employees who dealt with the public directly had to be vaccinated, such as staff at the Vatican Museums and the Swiss Guards, while others could access their offices with regular testing.

The mandate does not apply to the faithful attending Mass, but they are required to wear masks. Those attending Friday's Mass, and the priests, bishops and cardinals concelebrating it, all wore masks. Francis, who is missing part of one lung and had intestinal surgery in July, has largely eschewed masks, even when

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greeting prelates and the general public.

"I'm not worried because first of all I have a mask on, and I've had my third dose so I feel relaxed," said Franco Pasquali, a Rome resident attending the service. "The problem is those who don't vaccinate, that's all."

Francis is believed to have received the third booster shot, as has emeritus Pope Benedict XVI. Francis has said vaccination is an "act of love" and he has called for wealthier countries to provide the shots to the developing world.

Among those attending the Mass was Melissa Helland, an American tourist visiting Rome with her family.

"This is the first time in the last two years that we've been able to gather both as a family and to attend Mass because of the pandemic, so we are very excited and grateful," she said before the service began.

Francesco Sportelli and Luigi Navarro contributed from Vatican City.

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3rd Florida-based ship has outbreak, state cases hit record

Associated Press undefined

MIAMI (AP) — A COVID-19 outbreak took place on a South Florida-based cruise ship for the third time this week, as the number of coronavirus cases in Florida hit its highest level since the start of the pandemic.

An undisclosed number of passengers and crew aboard the Carnival Freedom cruise caught the virus so the ship was denied entry to Bonaire and Aruba, Carnival said in a statement.

The ship has 2,497 passengers and 1,112 crew members and was scheduled to return to Miami on Sunday following an 8-day cruise. Passengers were required to be vaccinated and they were tested before leaving last Saturday, according to Carnival.

"Carnival Freedom is following all protocols and has a small number on board who are in isolation due to a positive COVID test," the statement said. "Our protocols anticipate this possibility and we implement them as necessary to protect the health and safety of our guests and crew."

Ashley Peterson, a passenger on the ship, tweeted a photo of a Dec. 22 letter from the ship's captain apologizing for being unable to make stops in Aruba and Bonaire. The letter said passengers would get \$100 per room in onboard credit, as well refunds for planned excursions.

It was the third outbreak this week affecting cruise ships operated by Carnival and Royal Caribbean departing Miami and Fort Lauderdale.

Meanwhile, Florida had 31,758 new COVID-19 cases on Friday, breaking a record for the most cases in a single day since the start of the pandemic in the U.S. in March 2020, according to data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The new record was driven by the spread of the new omicron variant through the Sunshine State.

The previous single-day highest number of cases was in last August, during the height of the delta variant wave in Florida, when 27,802 cases were reported.

Yes, there is a Santa Claus. And no, COVID-19 won't stop him

By JAMES ANDERSON Associated Press

PETERSON SPACE FORCE BASE, Colo. (AP) — Rest assured, kids of all ages: Santa's coming this Christmas Eve, and a second holiday with COVID-19 won't stop him.

That's the word from the joint U.S.-Canadian military operation that for 66 years has been tracking Jolly Old St. Nicholas on his global mission and has assured us all — first by land line and more recently by iPhone, Android, OnStar, Facebook, YouTube and more — that he's on his way with a sleigh stuffed with toys and a welcome dose of joy.

In what's become its own wildly popular tradition, the Colorado-based North American Aerospace Defense Command provides real-time updates on Santa's progress Dec. 24, from 4 a.m. to midnight MST.

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NORAD's Santa Tracker lets families watch Father Christmas in 3D as he transits the South Pacific, Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas.

From deep inside NORAD headquarters, dozens of volunteers field an unrelenting wave of phone calls to 1-877-HI-NORAD (1-877-446-6723). They and other volunteers working off-site because of coronavirus distancing protocols will answer such questions as "When will he come to my house? What kind of cookies does he like?" said program manager and NORAD spokesman Preston Schlachter.

Want to watch? Visit <https://www.noradsanta.org>, check out #NORADTracksSanta and @NoradSanta on Twitter, or use the associated apps. You can also email noradtrackssanta@outlook.com for the latest.

President Joe Biden and first lady Jill Biden also participated in tradition, answering calls to the Santa tracking service. It is a longstanding tradition for first ladies, but the president joined this year as well.

Even before Friday's takeoff, the NORAD webpage had been visited more than 3 million times, Schlachter said.

"Every household, every country is having to deal with the impact of this pandemic. Santa Claus is an icon, and he is a source of joy for a lot of people," Schlachter said.

For those worried about Santa's safety — or their own — the bearded man likely will be wearing a mask at each stop, and of course he's wearing gloves, Schlachter noted. For the technically inclined, NORAD's website offers more data on the voyage (Weight of gifts at takeoff: 60,000 tons, or 54,600 metric tons; sleigh propulsion: nine RP, or reindeer power).

Like any good Christmas tale, the program's origin has been told for generations.

In 1955, Air Force Col. Harry Shoup — the on-duty commander one night at NORAD's predecessor, the Continental Air Defense Command — answered a call from a child who dialed a number that was misprinted in an ad in a newspaper, thinking she was calling Santa.

Shoup "answered the call, thought it was a prank at first, but then realized what had happened and assured the child that he was Santa, and thus started the tradition that we are celebrating now 66 years later," Schlachter said.

NORAD's mission is to watch the skies above North America for any potential threats. Come early Christmas Eve, the Santa operation begins when a cluster of radar stations in northern Canada and Alaska pick up an infrared signature emanating from Rudolph's nose. NORAD's array of geostationary satellites above the Earth monitor the journey.

It's all shown on large, "unclassified" display screens in a festively decorated command post at Peterson Space Force Base in Colorado Springs. Masked volunteers sit at tables equipped with telephones, garland, miniature Christmas trees, plenty of caffeine-laden candy and coffee — and hand sanitizer.

"We Have the Watch," is NORAD's military-mission motto.

And when it comes to Santa, NORAD adds:

"Santa calls the shots. We just track him."

Associated Press journalist Terry Chea in San Francisco contributed to this report.

South African minister objects to sale of Mandela's cell key

By ANDREW MELDRUM Associated Press

JOHANNESBURG (AP) — A South African Cabinet minister on Friday urged the cancellation of an upcoming U.S. auction of a key to the Robben Island prison cell where Nelson Mandela, the country's first Black president, was long jailed for his opposition to apartheid.

The key is among Mandela memorabilia being sold by Guernsey's auction house in New York on Jan. 28. Most of the items were provided by members of Mandela's family to raise funds for a planned museum and garden around his grave, while the key is being sold by Mandela's former jailer who became his friend.

"It is unfathomable for Guernsey's, which is clearly aware of the painful history of our country and the symbolism of the key, to consider auctioning the key without any consultation with the South African government, the heritage authorities in South Africa and Robben Island Museum," Minister of Sport, Arts,

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and Culture Nathi Mthethwa said in a statement.

"This key belongs to the people of South Africa under the care of Robben Island Museum and the South African State. It is not anyone's personal belonging," said Mthethwa.

In response, the auction house said the proceeds of the sale are to raise funds to build a 24-acre memorial garden and museum around Mandela's burial site. Mandela's oldest daughter, Makaziwe Mandela-Amuah, approached Guernsey's to hold an auction of Mandela memorabilia to help build the garden, Arlan Ettinger, president of Guernsey's, told The Associated Press.

"We are honored to sell many items from the Mandela family to help them create the garden," Ettinger said. The 33 objects to be auctioned include one of Mandela's colorful shirts, gifts from former U.S. presidents Barack Obama and George W. Bush, as well as items that he signed and artwork.

The key to his former jail cell is one of three items put up for sale by Christo Brand, Mandela's Robben Island jailer.

A draft of South Africa's constitution that Mandela inscribed to Brand and an exercise bicycle Mandela used were also provided for the auction by Brand. Brand's representative could not be reached for comment Friday.

The key has been in Brand's possession for many years and has been exhibited internationally, said Ettinger. Mandela's daughter has approved its sale and a portion of the proceeds will go to the garden fund, he said.

"The key symbolizes the worst and the best of humanity," said Ettinger. "The key locked up Mr. Mandela for his opposition to racial oppression and that was horrendous. The key also freed him and he went from prisoner to president of South Africa and became the inspiration for millions of people around the world. It seems fitting that the sale of the key can now help raise funds to create a memorial around Mr. Mandela's burial site."

Mthethwa, the minister of culture, said he will take action to stop the key's auction.

"The key must be returned to its rightful owners with immediate effect and this auction must be halted," said Mthethwa who added that he was discussing with authorities "appropriate steps that must be taken to stop the auction and to secure the return of the key to South Africa."

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Saturday, Dec. 25, the 359th day of 2021. There are six days left in the year. This is Christmas Day.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 25, 1991, Soviet President Mikhail S. Gorbachev went on television to announce his resignation as the eighth and final leader of a communist superpower that had already gone out of existence.

On this date:

In A.D. 336, the first known commemoration of Christmas on Dec. 25 took place in Rome.

In 1066, William the Conqueror was crowned King of England.

In 1776, Gen. George Washington and his troops crossed the Delaware River for a surprise attack against Hessian forces at Trenton, New Jersey, during the American Revolutionary War.

In 1818, "Silent Night (Stille Nacht)" was publicly performed for the first time during the Christmas Mid-night Mass at the Church of St. Nikolaus in Oberndorf, Austria.

In 1926, Hirohito became emperor of Japan, succeeding his father, Emperor Yoshihito.

In 1962, the movie version of "To Kill a Mockingbird," adapted from the Harper Lee novel and starring Gregory Peck, opened in Los Angeles.

In 1989, ousted Romanian President Nicolae Ceausescu (chow-SHES'-koo) and his wife, Elena, were executed following a popular uprising. Former baseball manager Billy Martin, 61, died in a traffic accident near Binghamton, New York.

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In 1995, singer Dean Martin died at his Beverly Hills home at age 78.

In 1999, space shuttle Discovery's astronauts finished their repair job on the Hubble Space Telescope and released it back into orbit.

In 2003, 16 people were killed by mudslides that swept over campgrounds in California's San Bernardino Valley. Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf (pur-VEHZ' moo-SHAH'-ruhv) survived a second assassination bid in 11 days, but 17 other people were killed.

In 2006, James Brown, the "Godfather of Soul," died in Atlanta at age 73.

In 2009, passengers aboard Northwest Airlines Flight 253 foiled an attempt to blow up the plane as it was landing in Detroit by seizing Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab (OO'-mahr fah-ROOK' ahh-DOOL'-moo-TAH'-lahb), who tried to set off explosives in his underwear. (Abdulmutallab later pleaded guilty and was sentenced to life in prison.)

Ten years ago: Five members of a family — three children and their grandparents — died in a Christmas morning blaze in Stamford, Connecticut, that was blamed on burning embers in a trash can. A suicide bombing of a Catholic church near Nigeria's capital left at least 44 people dead.

Five years ago: A Russian Tu-154 carrying 92 people to Syria crashed into the Black Sea shortly after takeoff from Sochi, killing all 92 people on board. Decrying the suffering in Syria, Pope Francis wished Christmas peace and hope for all those scarred by war and terrorism, which he said was sowing "fear and death in the heart of many countries and cities." George Michael, who rocketed to stardom with WHAM! and went on to enjoy a long and celebrated solo career, died at his home in Goring, England, at age 53.

One year ago: A recreational vehicle parked in the deserted streets of downtown Nashville exploded early Christmas morning, damaging dozens of buildings, causing widespread communications outages and grounding holiday travel at the city's airport; investigators later determined that the bomber, a 63-year-old Nashville-area man, was killed in the explosion. Pope Francis made a Christmas Day plea for authorities to make COVID-19 vaccines available to all, insisting that the first in line should be the most vulnerable and needy. Amid coronavirus restrictions, the annual Christmas morning reenactment of George Washington's crossing of the Delaware River could only be seen online, in a video that was made earlier in the month. Bluegrass guitarist Tony Rice died at his North Carolina home at 69.

Today's Birthdays: Author Anne Roiphe is 86. Actor Hanna Schygulla (SHEE'-goo-lah) is 78. R&B singer John Edwards (The Spinners) is 77. Actor Gary Sandy is 76. Singer Jimmy Buffett is 75. Pro and College Football Hall-of-Famer Larry Csonka is 75. Country singer Barbara Mandrell is 73. Actor Sissy Spacek is 72. Blues singer/guitarist Joe Louis Walker is 72. Former White House adviser Karl Rove is 71. Actor CCH Pounder is 69. Singer Annie Lennox is 67. Reggae singer-musician Robin Campbell (UB40) is 67. Country singer Steve Wariner is 67. Singer Shane MacGowan (The Pogues, The Popes) is 64. Baseball Hall of Famer Rickey Henderson is 63. The former chair of the Council of Economic Advisers, Christina Romer, is 63. Actor Klea Scott is 53. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is 50. Rock musician Noel Hogan (The Cranberries) is 50. Singer Dido is 50. Rock singer Mac Powell (Third Day) is 49. R&B singer Ryan Shaw is 41. Country singer Alecia Elliott is 39. Pop singers Jess and Lisa Origliasso (The Veronicas) are 37. Actor Perdita Weeks is 36. Rock singer-musician Lukas Nelson (Lukas Nelson & Promise of the Real) is 33.