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UpComing Events

Thursday, Jan. 20

Girls Basketball at Clark/Willow Lake. JV at 6 p.m. followed by varsity.

Friday, Jan. 21

Debate Speech Fiesta at Watertown High School

Postponed to Feb. 5: Boys Basketball hosting Clark/Willow Lake. 7th grade at 4 p.m., 8th grade at 5 p.m., JV at 6 p.m. followed by varsity game.

Wrestling Dual at Deuel High School, 6 p.m.

Saturday, Jan. 22

Debate Speech Fiesta at Watertown High School

Wrestling Tournament at Arlington, 10 a.m.

Monday, Jan. 24

Boys Basketball at Northwestern. 7th at 3:30, 8th at 4:30, C at 5:15, then JV and Varsity to follow.; Wrestling at Ipswich, 6 p.m.

Groton Daily Independent
PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445
Paul's Cell/Text: 605-397-7460

Surplus Van for Sale

The Groton Area School District is accepting sealed bids for the sale of a 1994 Chevy Beauville Van with liftgate. For more information or to see the vehicle, contact Transportation Director, Damian Bahr, at 605-397-8117 or Damian.Bahr@k12.sd.us. Bids can be dropped off at the high school office (502 N 2nd Street, Groton, SD) or mailed to Groton Area School District PO Box 410, Groton, SD 57445. Envelopes should be marked "Van Bid." Bids will be opened on Friday, January 28 at 2:00 PM. (0112.0119)

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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Groton Area COVID-19 Report

Groton Area School District

Active COVID-19 Cases

Updated January 18, 2022; 11:47 AM

Increase of 5 from Monday

J	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	1	1	1	S	T
K	G										0	1	2	t	t
														f	a
														f	I
0	2	1	3	0	0	2	1	2	2	2	1	2	5	2	26
Change	0	+1	+1	0	0	0	+1	0	0	0	0	0	0	+1	+5

City prepares for summer projects

A pay request for IMEG was approved. It was the fourth pay request. The third and fifth ones were paid and somehow the fourth got missed. The council approved the request for \$12,250.

The council authorized for the bidding of Ground Storage Reservoir Painting and for the Pool Resurfacing. The water main extension project will also be released for bidding at Wednesday's special city council meeting.

Construction Engineering fees by IMEG was discussed. Ken Hier said there is \$24,500 that is due on the water tower and pump house project. Construction Engineering is based on hourly fees. He said there was more of a demand from contractors during the project. Hier will present a bill at a future meeting.

After an executive session, the council accepted the resignation/retirement of Jerry Bjerke as Assistant Police Chief.

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Super Wildcard Weekend Roundup

By Jack & Duane Kolsrud

For the first time in NFL history, the AFC and NFC allowed seven teams to enter the playoffs, known as Super Wildcard Weekend.

Instead of six teams with two teams getting a bye, the new format only had one bye team each- Green Bay for the NFC and Tennessee for the AFC.

That meant there would be six games on the docket for the weekend and included the first Monday Night Football game in playoff history.

Initially, the format seemed to favor the home teams.

During game #1 on Saturday, the Cincinnati Bengals needed a 4th down stop inside their 10-yard line with just seconds to play to keep the Las Vegas Raiders from advancing. It was the first Bengals playoff win since 1991 but did not come without controversy as one touchdown was debated due to an inadvertent whistle. Final score: 26-19.

Game #2 on Saturday night, the Buffalo Bills destroyed the New England Patriots in what was called a perfect offensive game: the Bills scored on every offensive possession, never punting or turning the ball over to the Patriots. It was one of the worst losses in Bill Belichick's illustrious career with the Patriot dynasty. Final score: 47-17

Game #3 on Sunday was another game of some good ol' home-cookin'. The Tampa Bay Buccaneers got off to a hot start and never look back. Tom Brady wins for the 35th time in the playoffs, a milestone that is hard to fathom as he has more playoff wins as a starting quarterback than almost every team in the NFL- only the Pittsburgh Steelers have more with 36. Final score: 31-15

Game # 4 was the most exciting of the weekend and the only away team to win on the road. The San Francisco Forty-Niners, underdogs to the Dallas Cowboys, go into AT&T Stadium and beat the Cowboys. If not for a late turnover, the Niners handled the Cowboys for most of the game. The oddity was how the game ended. Dallas got one final chance to try to win the game only to have Dak Prescott run up the middle late in the game with no timeouts remaining. When the Cowboys tried to hurry and line up for a final play, the referee needed to spot the ball and the Cowboys fans were left to watch the clock expire. Final score: 23-17

Game #5 was the end of a stellar career for Ben Rothlisberger. Being decisive 12 point underdogs going into Kansas City, the two-time Super Bowl champion goes out quietly after 18 years in the NFL. The next call he will be getting is in 5 years from Canton, Ohio, and the NFL Pro Football Hall of Fame. Pittsburgh leads briefly on a TJ Watt fumble recovery for a touchdown but the Chiefs quickly turn the tables and score 28 points before halftime. Final score: 42-21..

Game #6 is between the Los Angeles Rams and Arizona Cardinals on Monday Night Football.

What do Vikings fans take away from the weekend's games? Well, first of all, it was a lot less stressful than the past 17 weeks. We couldn't blame our defense for giving up points before halftime and late in the game. Kirk Cousins didn't add to his three-and-out NFL-leading statistic for the season. Finally, we may have paired down our search for a new coach based on the rumors of some of the coordinators in the hunt that had pretty bad outings this weekend. Hopefully, we'll have a new general manager and head coach by the end of the week.

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Grapplers drop pair of dual matches

Clark/Willow Lake 46, Groton Area 25

- 285: Lane Krueger (Groton Area) wins by forfeit.
- 106: Cooper Pommer (Clark/Willow Lake) over Walker Zoellner (Groton Area) (Fall 4:41)
- 113: Porter Johnson (Groton Area) over Logan Foster (Clark/Willow Lake) (Fall 1:43)
- 120: Taylor Merkel (Clark/Willow Lake) wins by forfeit.
- 126: Matthew Batchelor (Clark/Willow Lake) over Isiah Scepaniak (Groton Area) (Fall 1:25)
- 132: Pierce Ketterling (Groton Area) over Ernesto Garcia (Clark/Willow Lake) (MD 13-0)
- 138: Ethan Mcelhone (Clark/Willow Lake) over Brevin Fliehs (Groton Area) (MD 8-0)
- 145: Christian Ehresmann (Groton Area) over Elliot Bratland (Clark/Willow Lake) (Dec 10-4)
- 152: Gunnar Kvistad (Clark/Willow Lake) over Korbin Kucker (Groton Area) (Fall 5:12)
- 160: Cole Bisbee (Groton Area) wins by forfeit.
- 170: Lucas Kannegieter (Clark/Willow Lake) wins by forfeit.
- 182: Hunter Wren (Clark/Willow Lake) wins by forfeit.
- 195: Kasey Michalski (Clark/Willow Lake) wins by forfeit.

Hamlin 32, Groton Area 22

- 285: Lane Krueger (Groton Area) over Noah Smith (Hamlin) (Fall 1:24)
- 106: Brody Randall (Hamlin) over Walker Zoellner (Groton Area) (TF 15-0 5:35)
- 113: Rylan Yonker (Hamlin) over Porter Johnson (Groton Area) (Dec 4-3)
- 120: Carter Jutting (Hamlin) wins by forfeit.
- 126: John Yonker (Hamlin) over Isiah Scepaniak (Groton Area) (Fall 0:19)
- 132: Pierce Ketterling (Groton Area) over Tate Everson (Hamlin) (MD 14-0)
- 138: Brock Gisselbeck (Hamlin) over Brevin Fliehs (Groton Area) (Fall 3:51)
- 145: Christian Ehresmann (Groton Area) over Chase Chambers (Hamlin) (Fall 3:35)
- 152: Troy Randall Jr. (Hamlin) over Korbin Kucker (Groton Area) (Fall 1:24)
- 160: Cole Bisbee (Groton Area) over Kaden St. Pierre (Hamlin) (Fall 3:48)

Groton City Council Special Meeting Agenda

January 19, 2022 – 6:00pm
City Hall – 120 N Main Street

(IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO CALL IN TO THIS MEETING, PLEASE MAKE PRIOR ARRANGEMENTS TO DO SO BY CALLING CITY HALL 605-397-8422)

1. Public Comments - pursuant to SDCL 1-25-1
(Public Comments will offer the opportunity for anyone not listed on the agenda to speak to the council. Speaking time will be limited to 3 minutes. No action will be taken on questions or items not on the agenda.)
2. Executive session personnel & legal 1-25-2 (1) & (3)
3. Authorization to bid Water Main Extension Schedule A
4. Adjournment



James Valley Thunder placed third at Bismarck Tourney

The James Valley Thunder traveling basketball team placed third in their tournament in Bismarck on Sunday. James Valley Thunder defeated South Prairie Knockouts, 28-19, they were defeated by Dream, 43-17, and came back to beat War Party, 34-22.

Back: Bentley Pickrel, Aberdeen; Abby Fjeldheim, Brooklyn Spanier, Kamdyn Borge, Aberdeen; Sydney Locke.

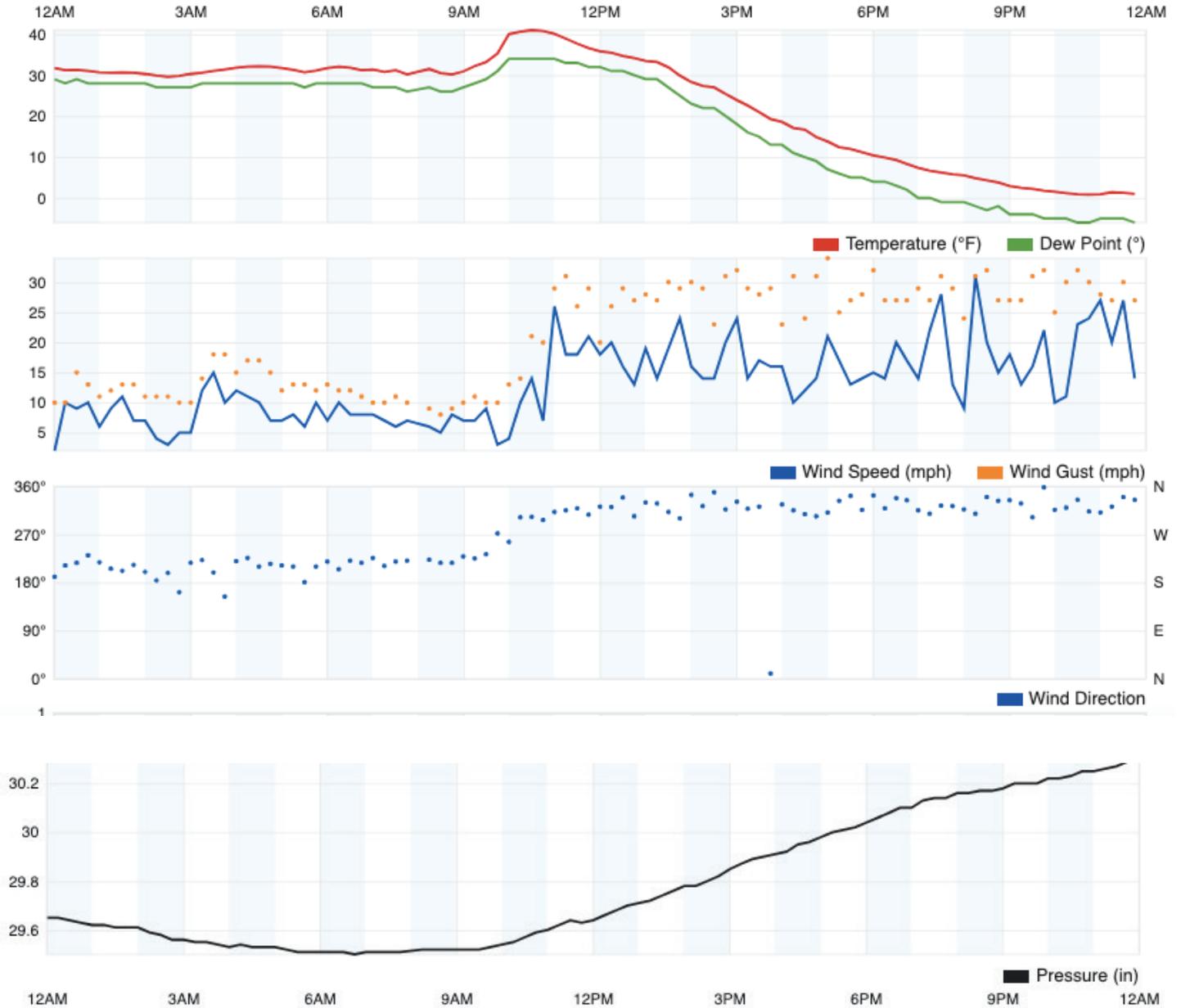
Front: Tevan Hansen, Arianna Dinger, Makenna Krause. Not pictured is Chesney Weber.

Coached by: Justin Hanson and Ryan Fjeldheim

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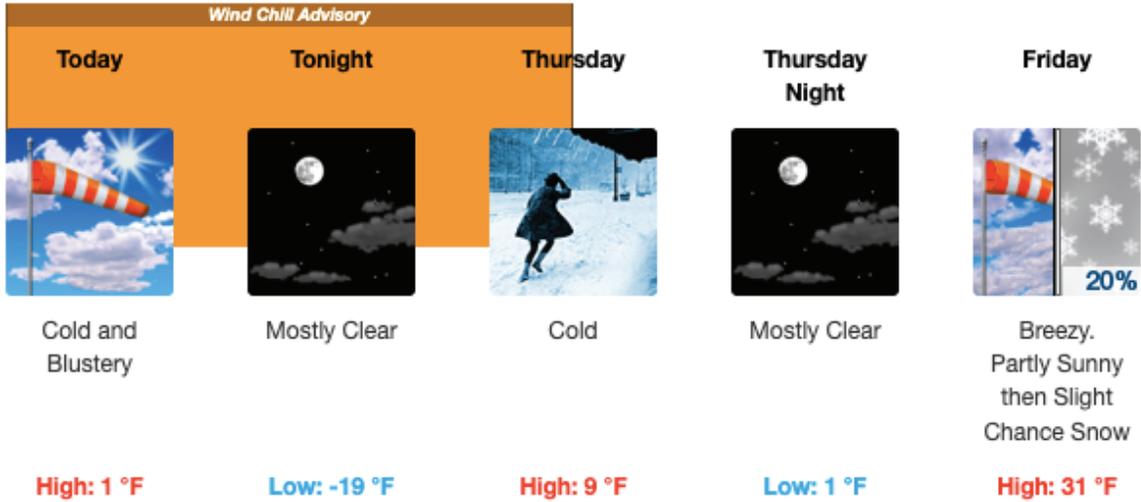
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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ARCTIC CHILL NOW MODERATION INTO THE WEEKEND



An arctic chill has settled in with single digit temperatures and dangerous wind chills, with little modification until a system moves in late in the week. A few more systems are expected to pass through the region this weekend and early next week, and that will result in a little bit milder temperatures but could also come with some precipitation.

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Today in Weather History

January 19, 1970: An extremely cold air mass was over settle over South Dakota and western Minnesota. After a frigid night, daytime high temperatures struggled to reach the single digits below zero. Overnight low temperatures across the area were from 25 below to 34 below zero, with daytime highs from 3 above at Sisseton to 12 degrees below zero at Pierre. Record low temperatures were set at Wheaton, Watertown, Pierre, and Kennebec. The temperature fell to 32 degrees below zero at Pierre, 33 degrees below zero at Watertown and Wheaton, and 34 degrees zero at Kennebec. Aberdeen fell to 35 degrees below zero, Sisseton dropped to 26 degrees below zero, Mobridge fell to 25 degrees below zero, Sisseton fell to 26 degrees below zero, and Timber Lake fell to 27 degrees below zero.

1810 - The famous "cold day" in New England. Gale force winds wrecked homes, and accompanied a sudden overnight drop in temperature of 50 degrees. Tragedy struck Sanbornton NH where three children froze to death. (David Ludlum)

1883: The steamers of Cimbria and Sultan collided in the North Sea due to dense fog. This collision resulted in the death of over 350 people.

1933 - Giant Forest CA received 60 inches of snow in just 24 hours, a state record, and the second highest 24 hour total of record for the U.S. (David Ludlum)

1961: Eight inches of snow fell and caused crippling traffic jams around the Washington D.C. area on the eve of John Kennedy's inauguration. The president-elect had to cancel dinner plans and, in a struggle to keep other commitments, reportedly had only 4 hours of sleep. Former President Herbert Hoover was unable to fly into Washington National Airport due to the weather, and he had to miss the swearing-in ceremony.

1977: Snow fell in South Florida for the first time in recorded history.

1987 - A storm tracking toward the northeastern U.S. produced up to 14 inches of snow in northern Indiana. Peru IN reported a foot of snow. Six cities in Florida reported new record high temperatures for the date. The afternoon high of 88 degrees at Miami equalled their record for the month of January. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - A powerful storm hit the central U.S. producing blizzard conditions in the Central High Plains, and severe thunderstorms in the Lower Mississippi Valley. Snowfall totals ranged up to 36 inches at Wolf Creek Pass CO, with 31 inches at Elsmere NE. Tornadoes claimed five lives in Tennessee, and a tornado at Cullman AL injured 35 persons. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - The high temperature for the day at Fairbanks, AK, was a frigid 41 degrees below zero, and the morning low of 24 degrees below zero at Anchorage AK was their coldest reading in fourteen years. (National Weather Summary)

1993: An unusual series of Pacific storm systems tracked across Arizona from January 6th through the 19th, producing heavy and prolonged precipitation across the state. These heavy rains caused the most widespread and severe flooding in Arizona since the turn of the century. The protracted rainfall over the 2 weeks caused multiple flood peaks on most streams and rivers. A large garbage landfill and portions of the new Mill Avenue Bridge under construction were washed away by the raging Salt River. The Gillespie Dam west of Phoenix was damaged as high water spread throughout low-lying areas. One man drowned while trying to cross the Agua Fria River. The image below is from Storm Data.

1996: January 1996 is known as one of the worst snowmelt floods on record for the Mid-Atlantic. The region saw blizzard conditions on January 6 and 7th, which produced 15 to 24 inches east of I-95, and 2 to 3 feet of snow west of I-95. With a tremendous amount of snow on the ground, on January 19, temperatures soared into the 50s and 60s ahead of an approaching cold front. At 7 am in Washington, D.C., was reporting a temperature of 60 degrees with a dewpoint of 60 degrees, both unusually high for a January morning. The warm temperatures combined with rain to melt much of the snowpack, released into the waterways.

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WHY NOT NOW, GOD?

It is always troubling for me to give hope or provide a suitable answer to one who has called on God for help and the call seems to go unanswered. What can I say to one when they are searching for an "absent" God?

What happens when in the midst of a life-ending disease, God does not respond the way we want Him to respond? What are we to think if God does not act in a way that meets our expectations? What can we say to an unbeliever who is asking questions about the suffering that goes on with no end in sight if we talk about a loving God? When thousands are starving, and food is going to waste, can we assure the hungry that God is sensitive to their pangs of hunger? What do we say to the scoffer? In fact, what do we who believe in a God who answers prayers, do when He seems to turn a deaf ear on us?

"Not to us, O Lord, not to us but to Your name be the glory because of Your love and faithfulness." The Gentiles were challenging the Israelites "silent God." They were looking for a God who kept His word, and this time He was nowhere to be found. While it is clear that God is in the heavens, what is He doing on earth? The Psalmist lives in the present - as we do - and wants to know why God seems unconcerned. The Psalmist in this verse wants God to act for God's sake - "Not to us," he cries. So, what's the answer? Is there one?

We live in a fallen world. Satan is still powerful and active. "All things will be new" when He returns. And in between now and then, He promises, "Lo, I am with you!"

Prayer: Father, Your Son did not want to suffer, but He did. As You were with Him, we trust you to be with us also. Come soon! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: -Not to us, LORD, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness. Psalm 115:1

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2022 Community Events

- 01/30/2022 84th Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm (Last Sunday of January)
01/30/2022 Groton Robotics Pancake Feed, 10am – 1pm, Groton Community Center, 109 N 3rd St, Groton,
04/09/2022 Lions Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter)
Dueling Pianos Baseball Fundraiser at the Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
04/23/2022 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
04/24/2022 Princess Prom 4:30-8pm (Sunday after GHS Prom)
05/07/2022 Lions Club Spring Citywide Rummage Sales 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)
St John's Lutheran Church VBS 9-11am
05/30/2022 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
Transit Fundraiser at the Community Center 4-7pm (Thursday Mid-June)
SDSU Alumni & Friends Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 12pm Start
Ladies Invitational at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Registration 10am Start
07/04/2022 Firecracker Couples Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Registration, 10am Start
(4th of July)
07/10/2022 Lions Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
Dacotah Bank Back To School Supply Drive
Professional Management Services Check-R-Board Days
Legion Auxiliary #39 Salad Buffet & Dessert Bar 11am-1pm at the Groton Legion
Baseball Tourney
Pro Am Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course
Ferney Open Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Start
How can we... "Love Groton"? United Methodist Church 9:30am
Moonlight Swim at the Swimming Pool 9-11pm for 9th grade to age 20
Golf Fundraiser Lunch at Olive Grove Golf Course 11a-1pm
JVT School Supply Drive
Wine on Nine at Olive Grove Golf Course 6pm
United Methodist Church VBS 5-8pm
Groton Firemen Summer Splash Day 4-5pm GHS Parking Lot
09/10/2022 Lions Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
6th Annual Doggie Day at the Swimming Pool 3:30-5pm
Couples Sunflower Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 12pm
Groton Airport Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport
10/14/2022 Lake Region Marching Band Festival 10am (2nd Friday in October)
10/01/2022 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm
10/31/2022 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm (working day on or closest to Halloween)
10/31/2022 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm
11/12/2022 Legion Post #39 Turkey Party 6:30pm (Saturday closest to Veteran's Day)
11/24/2022 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)
Tour of Homes & Holiday Party at Olive Grove Golf Course
Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9am-12pm

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The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

Subscription Form

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News from the  Associated Press

Tuesday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

Aberdeen Christian 41, Faulkton 37

Aberdeen Roncalli 52, Miller 31

Baltic 61, McCook Central/Montrose 50

Belle Fourche 58, Hill City 50

Britton-Hecla 45, Tiospa Zina Tribal 42

Castlewood 56, Dell Rapids St. Mary 37

Centerville 47, Freeman 33

Chamberlain 55, Gregory 44

Colman-Egan 42, Arlington 40

Corsica/Stickney 61, Andes Central/Dakota Christian 38

Deubrook 56, Alcester-Hudson 34

Ellendale, N.D. 41, Leola/Frederick 36

Flandreau 58, Deuel 19

Florence/Henry 67, Webster 32

Hamlin 74, DeSmet 47

Hanson 53, Howard 37

Huron 55, Brookings 37

Irene-Wakonda 47, Scotland 42

Kimball/White Lake 55, Bridgewater-Emery 52

Lennox 47, Parker 16

Milbank 59, Waubay/Summit 25

Mott-Regent, N.D. 51, Bison 37

Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 55, Redfield 23

New Underwood 39, Little Wound 34

Philip 45, Lower Brule 44

Pierre 55, Douglas 14

Platte-Geddes 52, Burke 35

Sioux Falls Christian 50, Garretson 32

Sioux Falls Jefferson 46, Yankton 42

Sioux Falls O'Gorman 78, Aberdeen Central 40

Sioux Falls Washington 64, Marshall, Minn. 58

Sioux Valley 86, Chester 53

Sully Buttes 54, Timber Lake 41

Tea Area 55, Beresford 25

Todd County 65, Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 29

Tri-State, N.D. 54, Wilmot 29

Vermillion 43, Elk Point-Jefferson 41, OT

Viborg-Hurley 58, Avon 23

Wagner 61, O'Neill, Neb. 14

Wall 46, Custer 39

West Central 73, Dell Rapids 23

White River 65, Lyman 28

281 Conference Tournament=

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Consolation Semifinal=

Hitchcock-Tulare 46, Sunshine Bible Academy 8

Sanborn Central/Woonsocket 57, Wessington Springs 39

Semifinal=

Highmore-Harrold 58, Iroquois/Doland 35

Wolsey-Wessington 46, James Valley Christian 29

POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=

Lisbon, N.D. vs. Sisseton, ppd.

McIntosh vs. Wakpala, ppd.

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=

Aberdeen Christian 58, Faulkton 54

Bowman County, N.D. 77, Harding County 64

Colome 48, Jones County 39

DeSmet 75, Hamlin 57

Dell Rapids St. Mary 56, Castlewood 50

Deubrook 71, Alcester-Hudson 42

Ellendale, N.D. 60, Leola/Frederick 29

Estelline/Hendricks 81, Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 76, OT

Flandreau 77, Deuel 56

Freeman Academy/Marion 71, Canistota 55

Gayville-Volin 50, Colman-Egan 39

Great Plains Lutheran 58, Waverly-South Shore 51

Howard 50, Hanson 41

Ipswich 68, North Central Co-Op 33

Irene-Wakonda 57, Scotland 54, OT

Lennox 74, Chamberlain 55

Miller 39, Aberdeen Roncalli 37

Mitchell Christian 61, Sioux Falls Lutheran 37

Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 63, Redfield 52

Northwestern 55, Warner 42

O'Neill, Neb. 83, Wagner 43

Potter County 76, Herreid/Selby Area 60

Sioux Falls Jefferson 66, Yankton 61

Sioux Falls Lincoln 68, Huron 44

Sioux Falls O'Gorman 67, Aberdeen Central 37

Sioux Falls Washington 58, Marshall, Minn. 54

Sioux Valley 67, Chester 51

Tiospa Zina Tribal 71, Britton-Hecla 63

Tripp-Delmont/Armour 65, Bon Homme 60

Vermillion 66, Elk Point-Jefferson 48

Viborg-Hurley 52, Avon 34

Waubay/Summit 65, Milbank 46

281 Conference Tournament=

Consolation Semifinal=

Highmore-Harrold 64, Iroquois/Doland 36

Sanborn Central/Woonsocket 50, Sunshine Bible Academy 18

Semifinal=

Wessington Springs 48, James Valley Christian 45

Wolsey-Wessington 69, Hitchcock-Tulare 33

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PAC Conference Tournament=
Edgemont 40, Crawford, Neb. 28
POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=
McIntosh vs. Wakpala, ppd.
Timber Lake vs. Sully Buttes, ppd.

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

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined
PIERRE, S.D. (AP) _ These South Dakota lotteries were drawn Tuesday:
Mega Millions
04-19-39-42-52, Mega Ball: 9, Megaplier: 4
(four, nineteen, thirty-nine, forty-two, fifty-two; Mega Ball: nine; Megaplier: four)
Estimated jackpot: \$347 million
Powerball
Estimated jackpot: \$62 million

South Dakota AG impeachment probe questions investigators

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press
PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota lawmakers weighing impeachment charges for the state's attorney general on Tuesday drilled into the investigation of his fatal car crash in 2020, spending hours questioning the law enforcement officers and a specialist who analyzed the crash.

Nearly all of the House investigative committee's work has so far happened behind closed doors, but the committee of seven Republicans and two Democrats met in public Tuesday to question the law enforcement officers who investigated Attorney General Jason Ravensborg after he struck and killed a man walking along a rural stretch of highway in September of 2020. The committee has pledged to release much of the crash investigation files, but it was not clear when they would.

The committee has been tasked with sifting through the crash investigation and recommending whether Ravensborg, the state's top law enforcement officer, should face impeachment charges in the House. Ravensborg, a Republican elected to his first term in 2018, first reported the crash as a collision with an animal and has insisted that he did not realize he had killed the man, 55-year-old Joseph Boever, until he returned to the scene the next day and discovered his body.

Lawmakers focused their attention on questioning the Highway Patrol's investigation, raising doubts about the crash report that determined Ravensborg's car had crossed onto the shoulder of the highway. At times, the law enforcement officers who oversaw the crash investigation faced aggressive, rapid-fire questions from the committee.

"We're just trying to be thorough in our investigation," House Speaker Spencer Gosch, who is overseeing the committee, said when asked by reporters about the committee's focus on questioning the investigation.

Highway Patrol Sgt. Kevin Kinney, who investigated the crash, acknowledged the investigation was complicated by the fact that it did not start until the day after the crash and that the blood of an animal was also found at the scene. But he defended his determination that the crash happened on the highway shoulder, saying he was confident that all four wheels of Ravensborg's car crossed onto the shoulder.

"Where we indicated the area of impact to be is accurate," Kinney told the lawmakers. "I know that Mr. Boever's face went through the windshield of the attorney general's vehicle and he deposited his glasses off of his face, part of them... on the on the floor and then the other part in the backseat."

John Daily, a crash investigator the state hired to analyze the crash scene, backed up the Highway Patrol's findings to lawmakers, saying that he had "95% confidence that all of the wheels were on the shoulder of the road."

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He added it was clear that Ravensborg was distracted when he struck Boever.

Several Republican lawmakers also drilled into how Secretary of Public Safety Craig Price oversaw the investigation amid the political fallout between Gov. Kristi Noem and Ravensborg. The Republican governor had the Highway Patrol conduct the investigation, but had the North Dakota Bureau of Criminal Investigation conduct parts of the probe, in part because Ravensborg oversaw the South Dakota agency that would have handled the case.

Gosch questioned why the North Dakota Highway Patrol had not conducted the entire investigation, "given the political nature of the situation."

Price repeatedly defended how he oversaw the investigation, from the crash investigation findings to the decision to publicly release parts of the investigation and his eventual public dissatisfaction with the misdemeanor charges prosecutors brought. But he also declined to discuss conversations he had with the governor.

He said the decision to release an initial crash investigation diagram and video of Ravensborg being interviewed by investigators was based on a pledge of transparency from the governor, even as lawmakers questioned whether that decision hurt the attorney general's right to a fair trial.

Ravnsborg pleaded no contest last year to a pair of misdemeanors — making an illegal lane change and using a phone while driving. Investigators found that Ravensborg was not on his phone at the time of the crash, but had used it in the minutes before.

"I think some of those committee members are out to exonerate the attorney general," said Nick Nemec, Boever's cousin who has been outspoken in his calls for the attorney general to be impeached. "And they were grilling law enforcement trying to come up with excuses that law enforcement didn't do their job right."

The state constitution stipulates that officials such as the attorney general can be impeached for "corrupt conduct, malfeasance or misdemeanor in office." The Legislature has never before impeached a state official.

US announces \$83M in latest round of tribal housing grants

By FELICIA FONSECA Associated Press

FLAGSTAFF, Ariz. (AP) — Emergency management officials on the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota have a new building, but they have been operating out of an old jail that's set to be torn down.

That's because the new building near a small airport doesn't have water and sewer connected, said Lislle Mesteth, who runs the Oglala Sioux Tribe's solid waste program. A new round of grant funding that the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development announced Tuesday will make those connections and help emergency responders into their new digs.

"They never had enough money to get it built entirely, so we've been doing little grants here and there," Mesteth said.

The \$3.4 million grant to the Oglala Sioux Tribe is part a third round of "imminent threat funding" from HUD, using money from the American Rescue Plan Act. The latest infusion — \$83 million — will benefit 74 tribes across the country and boost the total amount awarded so far to \$209 million spread among 191 tribes.

"This is thankfully, historic levels of funding in this particular program, and I know we're grateful for it, and I know the tribal communities are as well," said Adrienne Todman, deputy secretary of HUD. "This is a fair amount of money."

At least one more round of funding is coming with the remaining \$71 million, she said.

Tribes have been eagerly awaiting the money to cover cost overruns for existing projects and to start new ones. Tribal officials had expected more grant funding to be released last last year and have been texting, emailing and calling each other routinely for updates.

The Native Village of St. Michael in Alaska faces a housing shortage and wanted to ensure it could start building 26 tiny homes when the weather is good. The tribe got word Tuesday it will get more than \$1

million for the project.

"This is once-in-a-lifetime funding for tribes," said Hattie Keller, a housing consultant for the tribe.

The tribe already built gravel pads for the homes using \$1 million in federal virus relief funding. The village still needs to secure additional grant funding for water, sewer and electric poles, Keller said. About 430 people live in the village that has fewer than 100 houses, she said. Tribal leaders plan to offer the new homes as rent to own.

Tribes in Arizona and New Mexico have been awarded grants in all three rounds for housing, sanitation services, internet access and health care facilities, and to help families struggling to pay housing and utility bills during the pandemic.

Elsewhere, the Northern Arapaho Tribal Housing Authority in Wyoming will use its \$1 million grant to buy a couple of mobile medical units to aid its COVID-19 response. The Round Valley Indian Housing Authority in California will use \$1.7 million to renovate homes and develop a food bank. And the Nansemond Indian Nation in Virginia will expand and renovate a community center with its nearly \$1 million grant.

Todman acknowledge the grants won't be enough to fulfill all the needs in Indian Country. She said budget proposals have included increased funding.

HUD typically awards about \$70 million annually through its Indian Community Development Block Grant program for competitive grants and \$4 million for imminent threat grants. About 200 tribes apply each year, but only about 80 are funded, HUD spokesman Michael Burns said.

All of the American Rescue Plan Act money for the grants was designated as imminent threat, making it available on a first-come, first-served basis. HUD switched up its approach from awarding grants under the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act from releasing it in one batch to doling it out in rounds to give some tribes more time to apply.

HUD also raised the maximum amount that could be awarded through American Rescue Plan Act funding by 15% because it was a bigger pot of money and construction costs have soared, Burns said. The agency first considered requests that weren't funded under the CARES Act before taking new applications.

Tribes are required to report back to HUD on how the money is being spent.

Emergency management officials on the Pine Ridge reservation were using the grounds outside their new building Tuesday to make COVID kits. Much of their supplies are stored in shipping containers at the old jail that the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs plans to tear down once they move out, tribal officials said.

The Oglala Sioux's emergency manager, Steve Wilson, said tribal officials have been working out of the concrete jail for several years, even though it's been condemned. He said the electrical system is outdated and the building is inefficient.

The tribe applied for a HUD grant for the water and sewer in the new building in 2020 but didn't get it and was placed on a priority list for funding under the American Rescue Plan Act, he said. Construction of the new building started in 2019 but was delayed by a flood and the response to COVID, Wilson said.

Some finishing work still needs to be done, along with work on the computer network.

"I'm hoping summertime, we can get everything moved over to that place," Wilson said.

Mesteth also turned to HUD to request funding to restore a pump for a well in the village of Pine Ridge, connect 30 homes to the water system, repair broken water pipes in residents' homes and remove dilapidated mobile homes that are a health risk, she said. HUD fully funded the requests.

"This is really significant," she said. "This imminent threat one will be good, really good."

2nd South Dakota child under 10 dies after contracting COVID

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A second child younger than 10 years old has died after contracting the coronavirus in South Dakota, health officials reported Tuesday.

The state Health Department said the child was from Minnehaha County, which includes Sioux Falls. COVID-19 was "the underlying factor," department spokesman Daniel Bucheli said in an email to the Argus Leader. Bucheli said no further information would be made available.

The first death was an infant under the age of 1 out of Pennington County.

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More than 12,892 children under age 10 have tested positive for the virus since the pandemic began in March 2020.

The state confirmed 2,265 new and probable cases on Tuesday, when active cases reached a record high for a fifth time. The overall total for deaths due to the virus stands at 2,560, although health officials said fatalities can take several days to appear after they are reported.

All but one county in South Dakota is classified as having high community spread of the disease, according to the health department. Jones County is classified as having low community spread

Former Gettysburg Air Force base on market for \$4.5 million

GETTYSBURG, S.D. (AP) — A former Air Force base in north central South Dakota is on the market for \$4.5 million.

While the 42-acre base is no longer active, the Federal Aviation Administration continues to operate a radar site on the property at Gettysburg.

The retired businessman from California who owns the property, Lev Goukassian, initially listed the base for about \$1 million, but by Friday the asking price jumped to \$4.5 million.

Goukassian said he's been surprised by the offers he's received, including one international inquiry at the initial asking price, Aberdeen American News reported.

Potter County property records show Goukassian purchased the property in 2007. While photos of the property show its buildings are showing their age, Goukassian said the base buildings have strong walls and some unique features, including underground tunnels that connect them.

The base is listed as having 50 beds and 15 bathrooms.

The Gettysburg Air Force base was used from 1956 to 1968 as a radar station. Gettysburg was one of 28 sites selected for a radar surveillance network.

Blinken urges unity to fight 'relentless' Russian aggression

By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken urged western nations Wednesday to remain united in the face of what he called "relentless" Russian aggression against Ukraine and reassured Ukraine's leader of their support.

Blinken told Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy during a visit to Kyiv that the U.S. and its allies were steadfast in backing his country and its democratic aspirations amid growing fears of a potentially imminent Russian invasion.

"The Ukrainian people chose a democratic and European path in 1991. They took to the Maidan to defend that choice in 2013, and unfortunately ever since you have faced relentless aggression from Moscow," Blinken said, referring to Ukraine's trajectory since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

"Our strength depends on preserving our unity and that includes unity within Ukraine," he said to Zelenskyy. "I think one of Moscow's long-standing goals has been to try to sow divisions between and within our countries and quite simply, we cannot and will not let them do that."

The Biden administration said earlier it was providing an additional \$200 million in defensive military aid to Ukraine to help protect its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Zelenskyy thanked Blinken for the assistance, which was approved in late December but not formally confirmed until Wednesday, as well as for his visit and assurances of support.

"This (military) support not only speaks to our strategic plans of Ukraine joining the alliance, but more importantly to the level of our military, our military supplies," he said, referring to Kyiv's desire to join NATO over Russia's strong objections.

"If we want dramatically fast steps in modernizing the military, we need help especially in these tough times," Zelenskyy said. "Your visit is very important. It underlines once again your powerful support of our independence and sovereignty."

The aid announcement came at the start of Blinken's hastily arranged visit as U.S. and western officials

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stepped up increasingly dire warnings about a possible Russian invasion.

Blinken said Russian President Vladimir Putin is now in position to launch military action against Ukraine at will and at very short notice with more than 100,000 troops massed on its border and plans to add more.

"We know that there are plans in place to increase that force even more on very short notice and that gives President Putin the capacity, also on very short notice, to take further aggressive action against Ukraine," Blinken told staff at the U.S. Embassy in Kyiv.

After his meetings with Zelenskyy and other senior Ukrainian officials, Blinken plans a short trip to Berlin for talks with German and other European allies on Thursday. He is scheduled to see his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov, in Geneva on Friday. That meeting is aimed at testing Russia's willingness to resolve the crisis diplomatically, officials said.

The administration and its European allies have accused Putin of creating the crisis by massing troops along Ukraine's borders and it is up to him and the Russians to decide whether to invade and suffer severe economic consequences.

Russia has brushed off calls to withdraw its troops by saying it has a right to deploy its forces wherever it likes on its own territory. It also has rejected U.S. allegations that it's preparing a pretext to invade Ukraine. Lavrov dismissed the U.S. claim as "total disinformation."

The U.S. has not concluded whether Putin plans to invade or whether the show of force is intended to squeeze security concessions without an actual conflict. Inconclusive diplomatic talks between Moscow and the West in Europe last week failed to resolve stark disagreements over Ukraine and other security matters.

Instead, those meetings appear to have increased fears of a Russian invasion, and the Biden administration has accused Russia of preparing a "false flag operation" to use as a pretext for intervention. Russia has angrily denied the charge.

CIA Director William Burns visited Kyiv last week to consult with his Ukrainian counterparts and discuss current assessments of the risk to Ukraine, a U.S. official said, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss Burns' schedule, which is classified.

Ahead of his face-to-face meeting with Lavrov, Blinken spoke to the Russian foreign minister by phone on Tuesday and "stressed the importance of continuing a diplomatic path to de-escalate tensions," the State Department said.

Lavrov reaffirmed that Russia expects a written response this week from the U.S. and its allies to Moscow's request for binding guarantees that NATO will not embrace Ukraine or any other ex-Soviet countries or station its forces and weapons there.

Blinken underscored to Lavrov on Tuesday that any discussion of European security "must include NATO Allies and European partners, including Ukraine," the State Department said.

The Russian Foreign Ministry said Lavrov emphasized in the call with Blinken the key aspects of Russian draft documents envisaging "legally binding guarantees of Russia's security in line with the principle of indivisibility of security approved by all countries in the Euro-Atlantic." It said Lavrov stressed the importance for Washington to quickly deliver a written response to the Russian proposals.

Washington and its allies firmly rejected Moscow's demands during last week's Russia-U.S. negotiations in Geneva and a related NATO-Russia meeting in Brussels and it does not appear likely the Biden administration will reply to Russia in written form.

Meanwhile, the White House is accusing Russia of deploying operatives to rebel-controlled eastern Ukraine to carry out acts of sabotage there and blame them on Ukraine to create a pretext for possible invasion.

Ahead of Blinken's visit to Kyiv, a delegation of U.S. senators was visiting Ukraine to emphasize congressional support for the country.

Russia in 2014 seized the Crimean Peninsula after the ouster of Ukraine's Moscow-friendly leader and also threw its weight behind a separatist insurgency in eastern Ukraine. More than 14,000 people have been killed in nearly eight years of fighting between the Russia-backed rebels and Ukrainian forces in the country's industrial heartland called Donbas.

Putin has warned that Moscow will take unspecified "military-technical measures" if the West stonewalls its demands.

Major airlines cancel, change flights to US over 5G dispute

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Major international airlines canceled flights heading to the U.S. or changed the planes they're using Wednesday, the latest complication in a dispute over concerns that 5G mobile phone service could interfere with aircraft technology.

Some airlines said they were warned that the Boeing 777, a plane used by carriers worldwide, was particularly affected by the new high-speed wireless service. The aircraft is the workhorse for Dubai-based Emirates, a key carrier for East-West travel, and its flight schedule took one of the biggest hits.

It was not clear how disruptive the cancellations would be. Several airlines said they would try to merely use different planes to maintain their service.

The cancellations and changes came a day after mobile phone carriers AT&T and Verizon said they would postpone new wireless service near some U.S. airports planned for this week. The U.S. Federal Aviation Administration has cleared a number of aircraft to fly into airports with 5G signals, but the Boeing 777 is not on the list.

Similar mobile networks have been deployed in dozens of other countries — sometimes with concessions like reducing the power of the networks near airports, as France has done. But in the U.S., the issue has pitted the FAA and the airlines against the Federal Communications Commission and the telecoms companies.

The 5G service uses a segment of the radio spectrum that is close to that used by radio altimeters, which are devices that measure the height of aircraft above the ground and help pilots land in low visibility. The FCC, which set a buffer between the 5G band and the spectrum that planes use, determined that it could be used safely in the vicinity of air traffic. AT&T and Verizon have said their equipment will not interfere with aircraft electronics.

But FAA officials saw a potential problem, and the telecom companies agreed to a pause while it is addressed.

On Wednesday, Emirates announced it would halt flights to several American cities due to "operational concerns associated with the planned deployment of 5G mobile network services in the U.S. at certain airports." It said it would continue flights to Los Angeles, New York and Washington.

"We are working closely with aircraft manufacturers and the relevant authorities to alleviate operational concerns, and we hope to resume our U.S. services as soon as possible," the state-owned airline said.

Of particular concern appears to be the Boeing 777. Emirates only flies that model and the Airbus A380 jumbo jet.

Japan's All Nippon Airways said that the FAA "has indicated that radio waves from the 5G wireless service may interfere with aircraft altimeters."

"Boeing has announced flight restrictions on all airlines operating the Boeing 777 aircraft, and we have canceled or changed the aircraft for some flights to/from the U.S. based on the announcement by Boeing," ANA said. It canceled 20 flights over the issue to cities such as Chicago, Los Angeles and New York.

Japan Airlines similarly said that it had been informed that 5G signals "may interfere with the radio altimeter installed on the Boeing 777."

It said it will stop using the model in the continental U.S. for now. Eight of its flights were affected Wednesday — three passenger trips and five for cargo. Taiwan's EVA Air also said the FAA specifically said 777s may be affected, but it did not spell out how it would adjust its schedule.

But Air France said it planned to continue flying its Boeing 777s into American airports. It did not explain why it didn't change its aircraft as many other carriers have.

Chicago-based Boeing Co. did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Air India also announced on Twitter it would cancel flights to Chicago, Newark, New York and San Fran-

cisco because of the 5G issue.

But it also said it would try to use other aircraft on U.S. routes — a course several other airlines took. Korean Air, Hong Kong's Cathay Pacific and Austrian Airlines said they substituted different planes for flights that were scheduled to use 777s. Korean Air spokeswoman Jill Chung said the airline was also avoiding operating some kinds of 747s at affected airports. Germany's Lufthansa also swapped out one kind of 747 for another on some U.S.-bound flights.

British Airways canceled several planned U.S.-bound Boeing 777 flights and changed aircraft on others. The FAA has said it will allow planes with accurate, reliable altimeters to operate around high-power 5G. But planes with older altimeters will not be allowed to make landings under low-visibility conditions.

Part of the problem, according to the FAA, are the signal strength of the 5G towers and the orientation of their antennae.

"Base stations in rural areas of the United States are permitted to emit at higher levels in comparison to other countries which may affect radio altimeter equipment accuracy and reliability," the FAA said in December.

The FCC's chairwoman said in a statement that the 5G "deployment can safely co-exist with aviation technologies in the United States, just as it does in other countries around the world." However, Jessica Rosenworcel urged the FAA to conduct its safety checks with "both care and speed."

AT&T and Verizon spent tens of billions of dollars for the 5G spectrum known as C-Band in a government auction last year.

Choi Jong-yun, a spokeswoman of Asiana Airlines, said the company hasn't been affected so far because it uses Airbus planes for passenger flights to the U.S.

However, Choi raised a new wrinkle, saying airlines have also been instructed by the FAA to avoid automatic landings at affected U.S. airports during bad weather conditions, regardless of plane type. Asiana will redirect its planes to nearby airports during those conditions, she said.

Three of Tonga's smaller islands badly damaged by tsunami

By MOUSSA MOUSSA and DAVID RISING Associated Press

SYDNEY (AP) — Three of Tonga's smaller islands suffered serious damage from tsunami waves, officials and the Red Cross said Wednesday, as a wider picture begins to emerge of the destruction caused by the eruption of an undersea volcano near the Pacific archipelago nation.

Communications have been down throughout Tonga since the eruption on Saturday, but a ship made it to the outlying islands of Nomuka, Mango and Fonoifua on Wednesday, and reported back that few homes remain standing after settlements were hit with 15-meter (49 feet) -high waves, said Katie Greenwood, the head of delegation in the Pacific for the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, which had two people aboard the vessel to help assess the damage.

"Very unfortunate information has come to light overnight about the three islands that we were really worried about — that they have all suffered devastating consequences as an effect of these incoming waves," she told The Associated Press in an interview from Fiji. "Most of the structures and dwellings on those islands have been completely destroyed."

It is not clear yet what assistance Tonga needs or wants from the international community, and complicating matters is the country's concern over the possible spread of COVID-19, which it has effectively kept outside its borders except for one case reported in a traveler from New Zealand in October.

Tonga is hoping for "almost contactless disaster relief" as a precaution, Greenwood said, acknowledging that this would complicate efforts but is also understandable amid the pandemic.

"They really don't want to exchange one disaster for another," she said.

Some 60% of Tonga's 106,000 people have already received two doses of a COVID vaccine, and nearly 70% have received at least one dose, according to Our World in Data.

In anticipation of the country's needs, New Zealand has already sent two ships. One is carrying 250,000

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liters (66,000 gallons) of water and a desalination plant with the capacity to produce 70,000 more liters (18,492 gallons) per day, and another is bringing a survey and diving team to help assess the damage to shipping channels, ports and wharf infrastructure.

They're expected to take three to four days to arrive, though one estimate was that they could be there as early as Friday, said Peeni Henare, New Zealand's defense minister.

"We don't know what the shipping lanes look like, and so we want to, of course, proceed with a bit of caution as we get closer to the Tongan islands," he said.

New Zealand Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta said the teams en route would also be available to help if needed with the evacuation of the approximately 150 people who live on the devastated outlying islands.

"We stand ready to assist where it is useful to the government of Tonga, and where they are satisfied with COVID protocols," she said.

Australia is also preparing to send aid by air and ship, and Prime Minister Scott Morrison said he expected to talk with his counterpart in Tonga later Wednesday to better understand what is needed.

"Our defense forces have stood up their operation and are deploying as necessary and directed," he said. "So we feel deeply for our family in Tonga."

The volcano coated the main island with a 2-centimeter (0.78 inch) layer of ash, which has rendered the 2.6-kilometer (1.6 miles) runway at Fua'amotu International Airport unusable.

Volunteers have been working to sweep ash away to clear a path for aid planes to land, and there was hope it may be ready as early as Thursday.

Mahuta said the runway was not thought to be damaged beneath the ash, but that they would not know for sure until it was all cleared.

A New Zealand reconnaissance aircraft has already flown over the impacted islands and provided the data to Tonga's government.

Communications have been severely restricted because the single underwater fiber-optic cable that connects Tonga to the rest of the world was likely severed in the eruption. The company that owns the cable said the repairs could take weeks.

Satellite images captured the spectacular eruption of the Hunga Tonga Hunga Ha'apai volcano, with a plume of ash, steam and gas rising like a giant mushroom above the South Pacific. The volcano is located about 64 kilometers (40 miles) north of Tonga's capital, Nuku'alofa.

The heavy amount of ash in the air has also meant that satellite communications have been sporadic but they are improving, Greenwood said.

So far, it seems the country has avoided the widespread devastation that many initially feared.

The government said Tuesday it has confirmed three deaths — two local residents and a British woman — though it has cautioned the toll is expected to rise as more reports come in from outlying areas.

On Tonga's main island of Tongatapu, perhaps the biggest problem is the ash that has transformed it into a gray moonscape, contaminating the rainwater that people normally rely on to drink.

Greenwood said people had been warned in advance to protect their water supplies, and that clean drinking water remained the top need.

"Water is definitely, 100 percent, the top priority at this point in time, along with shelter needs," she said.

Meantime, Tonga's Red Cross, which has about 20 people and 100 trained volunteers, is already distributing shelter kits and other supplies, she said.

In Sydney, the deputy president of the Tonga Australia Chamber of Commerce, Koniseti Liutai, said his organization was facilitating free shipping containers for members of the local Tongan community to send aid to their relatives back home.

In particular, he said they were trying to address specific needs they had identified, those of the elderly or disabled.

"We know that the government of Tonga and Australia and New Zealand and others are addressing food and water," he said. "We're trying to be a little bit more specified for family requirements."

UK's Johnson faces Parliament as ouster bid gathers steam

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — British Prime Minister Boris Johnson faces a grilling from opponents in Parliament on Wednesday — and a more worrying threat from his own party's restive lawmakers, dozens of whom are plotting to oust him over a string of lockdown-flouting government parties.

Conservative legislators are judging whether to trigger a no-confidence vote in Johnson amid public anger over the "partygate" scandal. It's a stunning reversal of fortune for a politician who just over two years ago led the Conservatives to their biggest election victory in almost 40 years.

Johnson and loyal ministers were using a mix of pressure and promises in an effort to bring rebels back into line before they submit letters to a party committee calling for a vote of no confidence.

Under Conservative Party rules, a no-confidence vote in the party's leader can be triggered if 54 party lawmakers write letters to a party official demanding it.

So far only a handful of Conservative members of Parliament have openly called for Johnson to quit, though several dozen are believed to have submitted letters, including some legislators elected as part of a Johnson-led landslide in December 2019.

Conservative lawmaker Andrew Bridgen, who is calling for a change of leader, said he thought the 54-letter threshold would be reached "this week," setting the stage for a confidence vote within days.

If Johnson lost a confidence vote among the party's 360 lawmakers, it would trigger a contest to replace him as Conservative leader. The winner would also become prime minister.

The weekly Prime Minister's Questions session in the House of Commons on Wednesday comes a week after Johnson apologized to lawmakers for attending a "bring your own booze" gathering in garden of his Downing Street offices in May 2020. At the time, people in Britain were barred from meeting more than one person outside their household to help curb the spread of the coronavirus.

Johnson said he had considered the party a work gathering that fell within the rules.

"I'm absolutely categorical, nobody said to me, 'This is an event that is against the rules,'" Johnson said Tuesday.

Senior civil servant Sue Gray is investigating claims that government staff held late-night soirees, boozy parties and "wine time Fridays" while Britain was under coronavirus restrictions in 2020 and 2021. The allegations have spawned public anger, incredulity and mockery as well as prompted a growing number of Conservatives to call for Johnson's resignation.

Gray's report is expected to be published by the end of the month.

Johnson's apologies — in which he acknowledged "misjudgments" but did not personal rule-breaking — appear to have weakened, rather than strengthened, his position in the party.

He has urged his opponents to wait for Gray's verdict, though experts say there is a good chance the investigation will neither exonerate him nor conclude the prime minister broke the law.

Even lawmakers who have backed Johnson say he would have to resign if he is found to have lied.

Armed Forces Minister James Heappey said members of the public were "absolutely furious."

"I am angry, too," Heappey told Times Radio, but added that "the prime minister has stood up at the despatch box and set out his version of events and apologized profusely to the British public."

"I choose to believe what the prime minister has said. But I know that that's not good enough for many of my constituent," he said.

White House: Texas hostage-taker had raised no red flags

By MICHAEL BALSAMO, JAKE BLEIBERG and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

DALLAS (AP) — The gunman who took four people hostage at a Texas synagogue in a 10-hour standoff that ended in his death was checked against law enforcement databases before entering the U.S. but raised no red flags, the White House said.

Malik Faisal Akram, a 44-year-old British citizen, arrived in the U.S. at Kennedy Airport in New York on

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a tourist visa about two weeks ago, officials said. He spent time in Dallas-area homeless shelters before the attack Saturday in the suburb of Colleyville.

Akram was not believed to be included in the Terrorist Screening Database, a listing of known or suspected terrorists maintained by the FBI and shared with a variety of federal agencies, two law enforcement officials told The Associated Press. Had he been included, it would have been extremely difficult for him to get into the country.

"Our understanding, and obviously we're still looking into this, is that he was checked against U.S. government databases multiple times prior to entering the country, and the U.S. government did not have any derogatory information about the individual in our systems at the time of entry," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Tuesday.

She added: "We're certainly looking back ... what occurred to learn every possible lesson we can to prevent attacks like this in the future."

British media, including the Guardian, reported Tuesday that Akram was investigated by the domestic intelligence service MI5 as a possible "terrorist threat" in 2020, but authorities concluded he posed no danger, and the investigation was closed.

Britain's Home Office did not immediately comment on the reports.

The case illustrated once more the difficulties in identifying potential lone-wolf attackers, despite the U.S. government's enormous strides in its counterterrorism efforts since 9/11.

The standoff in Colleyville, a city of about 26,000 people 30 miles (48 kilometers) northwest of Dallas, ended after the last of the hostages ran out of the synagogue and an FBI SWAT team rushed in. Akram was killed, though authorities have declined to say who shot him.

President Joe Biden called the episode an act of terror.

Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker, who was among the hostages, told CBS that he had let Akram into Congregation Beth Israel because he appeared to need shelter. The rabbi said the man wasn't threatening or suspicious at first, but later he heard a gun click as he was praying.

One hostage was released hours later, and the rabbi and two others later escaped after Cytron-Walker threw a chair at the gunman.

During the standoff, Akram could be heard on a Facebook livestream demanding the release of Aafia Siddiqui, a Pakistani neuroscientist who is suspected of having ties to al-Qaida and was convicted of trying to kill U.S. troops in Afghanistan. The prison where Siddiqui is serving her sentence is in nearby Fort Worth.

An attorney in Texas who represents Siddiqui said the prisoner had no connection to Akram.

The investigation stretched to England, where over the weekend police announced two teenagers were in custody in connection with the standoff. The teenagers are Akram's sons, two U.S. law enforcement officials told AP. The officials were not authorized to discuss the investigation and spoke on condition of anonymity.

On Tuesday, police in Britain said the teenagers had been released without charge.

Akram is from the English industrial city of Blackburn. His family said he had been "suffering from mental health issues."

Investigators believe he had initially traveled to New York believing that Siddiqui was still being held there — where her trial occurred — without realizing she had been sent to a federal prison in Texas.

During the standoff, Akram forced Cytron-Walker to call Angela Buchdahl, the senior rabbi at New York's Central Synagogue, in a bid to win Siddiqui's release. In at least one subsequent call, Akram ranted and demanded that Buchdahl try to get Siddiqui freed, an official said. Buchdahl called 911 and reported the calls to New York City police.

Investigators are still sorting through Akram's movements in the U.S. and reviewing his financial and phone records, but believe he may have traveled by bus to Texas, two of the officials said.

Authorities believe he bought the handgun used in the hostage-taking in a private sale, according to a person familiar with the matter who spoke on condition of anonymity because the investigation is still

going on.

In another major terrorism case, Omar Mateen, who killed 49 people at an Orlando, Florida, nightclub in 2016, had been investigated repeatedly by the FBI but not charged. The Orlando massacre and other attacks prompted the FBI to launch an internal review of how it handled tips and leads in terrorism investigations.

1 year in: Biden ready to talk through progress, setbacks

By ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — One year into a presidency defined by lofty ambitions and at-times frustrating shortfalls, President Joe Biden will try to talk anxious Americans through the challenges of delivering on his lengthy to-do list as he holds a rare news conference and asks for patience with the pace of progress.

In advance of the session, set for 4 p.m. EST Wednesday, his 365th day in office, Biden gave no indication that he felt a reset was in order. But his appearance was playing out on the same day that prolonged Democratic efforts to overhaul the nation's voter laws appeared set to go down in flames on Capitol Hill and as Biden's massive social spending package remains stalled.

The East Room event will offer Biden an opportunity to spotlight his accomplishments before a national audience, and he was sure to highlight the bipartisan infrastructure law enacted on his watch, a roaring economy and the country's progress against COVID-19.

Still, it is a perilous time for Biden: The nation is gripped by another disruptive surge of virus cases and inflation is at a level not seen in a generation. Biden's approval rating has fallen sharply over his first year in office and Democrats are bracing for a potential midterm rout if he can't turn things around.

Biden has held just six solo news conferences during his first year in office. The ongoing threat from the coronavirus will be evident in the very setup of Wednesday's gathering: A limited number of reporters will be allowed to attend, and all will have to be tested for the virus and wear masks.

The White House said Biden would use his appearance to highlight progress made but also to "level" with the public about the challenges ahead.

"The work is not done, the job is not done, and we are certainly not conveying it is," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Tuesday. "So, our objective, and I think what you'll hear the president talk about tomorrow, is how to build on the foundation we laid in the first year."

As for voting rights, she said, Biden's view "is that it's never a good idea not to shoot for the moon with what your proposals are and what you're fighting for. And the alternative is to fight for nothing and to fight for nothing hard."

The enduring impact of COVID-19 has become a weight on Biden's presidency, despite his best efforts to rally the country in common purpose to defeat the virus. As a candidate, he promised to restore normalcy to a pandemic-riven nation, but overcrowded hospitals, shortages at grocery stores and fierce divisions over vaccine mandates and face mask requirements abound.

On the Senate floor, meanwhile, Democrats are on track to lose a vote to change the chamber's rules in order to pass voting reform legislation due to the opposition of Democratic Sens. Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona and Joe Manchin of West Virginia. That will underscore the constraints on Biden's influence barely a week after he delivered an impassioned speech in Atlanta comparing opponents of the measures to segregationists and exhorting senators to action.

And just a month ago, Manchin blocked Biden's roughly \$2 trillion legislation aiming to address climate change, reduce child poverty and expand the social safety net, paid for by new taxes on the wealthy. That bill, which contains much of what Biden hopes will form an enduring domestic legacy, is now on the back burner as Democrats await guidance from Biden on how to proceed.

The bill was once viewed as a catch-all home for various progressive priorities, but now Democrats are sensing the need to deliver another accomplishment to voters in the midterm year and are beginning to come to terms with a slimmed-down package that can overcome Manchin's reticence.

"I'm open to whatever is going to get us across the finish line," Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren

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told CBS News on Tuesday. "We just need to get what we can across the finish line."

Senate Democratic whip Dick Durbin encouraged Biden to be "honest and realistic" in his comments to Americans, particularly about the harsh realities what's possible in a 50-50 divided Senate where any one lawmaker can block Biden's agenda.

"We have to have an agenda that is not only appealing to the voters, but is realistic on Capitol Hill," Durbin, D-Ill., told reporters Tuesday. "It's OK to have an ambitious agenda, but it has to come down to the harsh reality of producing votes."

Recent Democratic presidents have engineered course corrections in their first terms after suffering rebukes in the midterm elections. President Bill Clinton shifted in a more moderate direction after getting thumped in 1994; President Barack Obama was forced to recalibrate after acknowledging he'd gotten "shellacked" in the 2010 midterms.

Biden, for his part, is signaling he's not ready for a major shift in direction after recent policy setbacks. Instead, his White House is promising dogged work to deliver on promises made.

His words will be closely analyzed both at home and abroad, as the U.S. seeks to rally an international coalition to defuse a perilous situation in Eastern Europe.

"We're now at a stage where Russia could, at any point, launch an attack in Ukraine," Psaki said Tuesday, reiterating that the U.S. and its allies would impose stiff economic penalties on Russia if it seized any more Ukrainian territory.

Former Obama press secretary Robert Gibbs called on Biden to acknowledge Americans' anxieties about the future.

"President Biden needs to reassure Americans he understands their economic concerns, particularly around inflation and that his administration is focused on getting the country back to normal by increasing testing availability, working to keep schools and businesses open and giving clearer guidance around COVID," he said.

"He should resist the idea of a victory lap or trying in one event to reframe the present narrative by proving what he has already accomplished and instead live where anxious Americans are, talk about the road ahead and less about the road already traveled," Gibbs added.

Tracking Biden's 1st-year progress delivering on promises

By ALEXANDRA JAFFE and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — During his first year in office, President Joe Biden took action on a number of his key campaign promises, from rebuilding U.S. alliances globally to distributing vaccines across America and the world.

But others remain works in progress or dependent on Congress to address. That's particular true of his promises to reform the nation's immigration system, where Biden is caught between the demands of his Democratic base and Latino voters and the realities of a steep influx of migrants to the U.S.

A look at where Biden stands on some of his key promises as he rounds out his first year:
COVID-19

— Reach a semblance of normalcy by Christmas 2021.

Broken. The delta and then the omicron variants drove fresh records in infections, spikes in hospitalizations, business closures and shortages of goods nationwide over the holiday season.

— Provide Americans with 1 billion home tests.

In progress. In December, Biden pledged to provide 500 million rapid tests amid a surge in the highly transmissible omicron variant, and announced plans last week to distribute an additional 500 million tests. A distribution website launches Wednesday.

— Provide 100 million vaccine shots to Americans in his first 100 days, and vaccinate 70% of the world's population against COVID by September 2022.

In progress. Biden surpassed the domestic vaccination goal, but only about 61% of the world's population has received one dose.

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— Safely reopen a majority of K-8 schools and keep them open.

Mostly accomplished. Schools are largely back to in-person learning, but the omicron surge has caused closures and other issues in a handful of school districts nationwide.

— Pass a \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief legislative package.

Done; the bill passed last March. It also delivered on his promise to provide \$2,000 in direct aid payments to Americans.

CLIMATE

— Rescind Keystone XL oil pipeline permit, protect the Arctic National Wildlife Reserve, rejoin the Paris climate agreement and embrace the Kigali Amendment to the Montreal Protocol to reduce harmful hydrofluorocarbons, or HFC's.

Done.

— Ban new oil and gas leases on federal lands and offshore waters.

Broken. The administration has proposed reforms to the nation's oil and gas leasing program but hasn't embraced a full ban.

ECONOMY

— Roll back President Donald Trump's 2017 cuts to corporate tax rates.

Broken. Biden's social and environmental spending package included tax hikes on corporations and the wealthy, but the bill is currently stalled in the Senate.

— Pause federal student debt payments.

Done.

— Order a review of U.S. supply chains.

Done.

IMMIGRATION

— Raise refugee cap to 125,000, up from the 15,000 set by Trump.

Not close. Biden signed an executive order in February raising the cap to 62,500 refugees.

— Surge humanitarian resources to the border and encourage public-private partnerships to deal with an increase in migration there.

Yes, but officials have still struggled to deal with the influx of migrants at the border. Biden signed an executive order asking officials to prepare plans for using humanitarian resources there. He has yet to establish new public-private partnerships.

— Reform the U.S. asylum system.

Incomplete. Biden signed an executive order in February directing his officials to craft a strategy for migration, including refugees and asylum seekers, and while he promised last year to implement a new "humane" asylum system, there's been no sign of specifics from the White House. And the Biden administration has continued a Trump-era policy that allows Customs and Border Protection to quickly expel migrants who enter the country without authorization to avoid the spread of COVID-19.

— Reverse Trump-era policies on travel restrictions on people from a number of Muslim-majority countries, funding and building the border wall, a provision discouraging migrants from using public benefits, and one expanding criteria for deporting immigrants.

Done.

— Streamline and improve the naturalization process for green-card holders.

In progress. Biden signed an executive order in February to improve the naturalization process, and the Department of Homeland Security has since revoked some Trump-era rules.

— End family separation policy and create a task force to reunite families separated at the border.

Done. Biden signed executive orders ending the policy and establishing a task force focused on reuniting families. Only a handful of families have been reunited thus far due to difficulties locating the parents.

— Protect young immigrants brought to the U.S. illegally by their parents by reinstating the Obama-era policy defending them and their families from deportation.

In progress. Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said in March his agency was issuing a rule to "preserve

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and fortify" the policy, which would deprioritize young immigrants from deportation, but the policy itself is still facing challenges in court.

— End prolonged migrant detention and invest in a case-management system to process people.

Broken. There's been no announcement of added investments in case-management systems. While the administration said in March it would attempt to release parents and children within 72 hours of their arrival, officials acknowledged that hundreds of children have been held by Border Patrol for much longer. The administration is struggling with an increase in unaccompanied minors arriving at the border and a lack of facilities to house them.

DOMESTIC POLICY

— Reverse transgender military ban.

Done.

— Establish police oversight board.

Abandoned. The Biden administration decided to scrap the idea based on input from civil rights groups and police unions.

— Direct attorney general to deliver a list of recommendations for restructuring the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives and other Justice Department agencies to better enforce gun laws.

Not yet.

— Direct FBI to issue report on delays in background checks for gun purchases.

Not yet.

FOREIGN POLICY

— "End the forever wars in Afghanistan and the Middle East" and terminate U.S. involvement in the Yemen civil war.

Mixed. The U.S. ended the 20-year war in Afghanistan in August, albeit in a bloody and chaotic fashion. The administration, however, announced in November it would sell \$650 million worth of air-to-air missiles Saudi Arabia, a central player in the Yemen conflict.

— Put human rights at the center of foreign policy.

Mixed. Biden has repeatedly called out China for targeting democracy activists in Hong Kong and human rights abuses against Uyghur and ethnic minorities. He's also raised concerns about the jailing and treatment of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny. He declined to hold Saudi Arabia's crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, directly responsible for the killing of U.S.-based journalist Jamal Khashoggi despite U.S. intelligence showing Salman approved of the hit.

— Improve ties with allies who had rocky relations with Trump.

Mixed. Biden won praise from allies for his efforts to reclaim U.S. leadership on climate issues. Indo-Pacific leaders have been pleased by coordination efforts on China policy. Biden acknowledged his administration stumbled with the rollout of a deal to provide nuclear submarine technology to Australia, a move that torpedoed a \$66 billion French deal and led to Paris temporarily recalling its ambassador to Washington. His decision to move forward with the U.S. military withdrawal in Afghanistan rankled some NATO allies who sought to extend the mission to stave off a Taliban takeover.

— Quickly rejoin the nuclear deal with Iran so long as Tehran comes back into compliance.

Not accomplished. Indirect talks haven't collapsed, but White House hopes are fading.

Biden to give away 400 million N95 masks starting next week

By ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration will begin making 400 million N95 masks available for free to Americans starting next week, now that federal officials are emphasizing their better protection against the omicron variant of COVID-19 over cloth face coverings.

The White House announced Wednesday that the masks will come from the government's Strategic National Stockpile, which has more than 750 million of the highly protective masks on hand. The masks will be available for pickup at pharmacies and community health centers across the country. They will

begin shipping this week for distribution starting late next week, the White House said.

This will be the largest distribution of free masks by the federal government to the public since the COVID-19 pandemic began. In early 2020, then-President Donald Trump's administration considered and then shelved plans to send masks to all Americans at their homes. President Joe Biden embraced the initiative after facing mounting criticism this month over the inaccessibility — both in supply and cost — of N95 masks as the highly transmissible omicron variant swept across the country.

After facing similar criticism over a winter shortage of COVID-19 at-home test kits, Biden this week launched a website for Americans to order four rapid tests to be shipped to their homes for free, with the first tests to ship later this month.

The White House said the masks will be made available at pharmacies and community health centers that have partnered with the federal government's COVID-19 vaccination campaign.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Friday updated its guidance on face coverings to more clearly state that properly fitted N95 and KN95 masks offer the most protection against COVID-19. Still, it didn't formally recommend N95s over cloth masks.

The best mask "is the one that you will wear and the one you can keep on all day long, that you can tolerate in public indoor settings," CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said last week.

Details were not immediately available on the specifics of the program, including the sort of masks to be provided, whether kid-size ones will be available and whether the masks could be reworn.

The White House said that "to ensure broad access for all Americans, there will be three masks available per person."

N95 or KN95 masks are more widely available now than at any other time during the pandemic, though they are often more costly than less-protective surgical masks or cloth masks.

Beijing residents disappointed Olympics will be closed event

BEIJING (AP) — With just over two weeks before the opening of the Beijing Winter Olympics, residents of the Chinese capital say they're disappointed at not being able to attend events because of coronavirus restrictions that have seen parts of the city placed under lockdown.

Organizers announced Monday that no tickets will be sold to the general public and only selected spectators will be allowed. Access to the famed National Stadium, known as the Bird's Nest, and indoor venues in the heart of Beijing have been sealed off.

People interviewed Wednesday appeared understanding of the restrictions. Many of them could be seen skating on Beijing's frozen lakes in a sign of continuing enthusiasm for winter sports.

Because China allows no public protests or opinion polling and tightly restricts free speech, any opposition to the Games or the restrictions would be muted.

Chen Lin had planned to buy tickets for speed skating, but gave up over personal concerns about the pandemic and after it became clear that tickets would only be offered to selected spectators.

"I went to the Beijing Summer Olympic Games in 2008. It's a pity that I won't be able to watch the Games this time during the Winter Olympics," the 38-year-old said. "Of course, we can still watch the Games with live broadcast on TV and live streaming online, but it doesn't provide as strong a sense of engagement as watching the Games on the spot."

Beijing is the first city to be awarded the right to host both the Summer and Winter Games.

Chen said the level of excitement this year was far below that of 2008, when the Games brought an outpouring of national pride.

"On the one hand, the Winter Olympics don't get as much attention as the Summer Olympics. On the other hand, there is also the pandemic. Both of them are the reasons," he said.

Retiree and amateur photographer Wang Shaolan, who volunteered at the 2008 Games, said she had been hoping to take her camera along to events in order to "be part of this."

"But now with the closed-loop management, we won't be able to be there ourselves. That's a pity," Wang said, referring to the restrictions separating participants from the general population.

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The recent appearance of the more contagious omicron variant of the coronavirus in Beijing has heightened concerns about outbreaks, although the capital reported just one new case Wednesday.

Elsewhere in the country, around 20 million people are under some form of lockdown and mass testing has been ordered in entire cities where cases have been discovered.

China has largely avoided major outbreaks with lockdowns, mass testing and travel restrictions, although it continues to fight surges in several cities, including the port of Tianjin, about an hour from Beijing.

Restrictions were also tightened in the Henan province city of Anyang south of Beijing, where an additional 29 cases of local transmission were reported Wednesday, out of a national total of 55.

Games organizers have already announced that no fans from outside the country will be allowed.

The Olympics begin Feb. 4, just days after the start of Lunar New Year celebrations. Athletes, officials, staff and journalists are required to enter an anti-pandemic bubble without outside contact and undergo daily testing.

As an additional precaution, Beijing will require travelers to take nucleic acid tests within 72 hours of entering the city starting Jan. 22. Schools in Beijing have also closed early and moved classes online ahead of the winter holidays.

Along with coronavirus worries, the Games have been beset by political controversies, including a decision by the U.S. and its close allies not to send dignitaries in protest over China's treatment of its Muslim Uyghur minority and other human rights abuses.

On Tuesday, athletes were urged by human rights activists to avoid criticizing China because they could be prosecuted.

The International Olympic Committee has said athletes will have freedom of speech when speaking to journalists or posting on social media. However, the Olympic Charter rule that prohibits political protests at medal ceremonies also requires "applicable public law" to be followed.

The IOC has not responded to requests in recent days to clarify how Chinese law could apply at the Games.

Asked about the free speech issues at the Olympics, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian said Wednesday that China understood the IOC banned athletes from political protests.

"I would like to reiterate that China welcomes athletes from all countries to participate in the Beijing Winter Olympic Games and will ensure their safety and convenience," Zhao told reporters at a daily briefing.

EXPLAINER: Are Turkey's efforts to fix the economy working?

By SUZAN FRASER Associated Press

ANKARA, Turkey (AP) — Turkey's government and central bank have taken unconventional steps in recent weeks to prop up a beleaguered economy crippled by skyrocketing consumer prices, instead of ending a much-criticized plan to cut interest rates.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's insistence on cutting rates — the opposite of what economists say to do to curb soaring inflation — has weakened the country's currency and driven prices even higher, making it tough for people to buy basics like food.

Here's a look at the impact of Erdogan's economic policies and their long-term risks:

WHAT'S GOING ON?

Erdogan, who has grown increasingly authoritarian and long declared himself an enemy of high borrowing costs, has pressured the central bank into continually cutting interest rates even though inflation surged by 36% last month.

In comparison, inflation in the 19 countries using the euro made a record 5% jump from a year earlier, and the U.S. tallied a nearly 40-year high of 7%.

Conventional economic thinking calls for increased borrowing costs to tame inflation, like other countries have done, but Erdogan maintains it's the opposite.

He has fired three central bank governors since 2019 over differences on interest rates, arguing lowering them will increase exports and lead to more growth and jobs. He also has cited Islamic teachings

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that regard usury as a sin.

Erdogan's unorthodox policy has foreign investors fleeing Turkey, while locals have been trying to protect their savings from high prices and a depreciating currency by converting them into foreign money or gold. The Turkish lira hit successive record lows in November and December and lost about 45% of its value against the U.S. dollar last year.

With prices soaring, even basic goods are out of reach for many Turks. Opposition parties, meanwhile, are disputing the official inflation number; an independent inflation research group says the real figure is a stunning 82%.

"Anyone who goes out shopping knows that the 36% inflation is fictitious," said Ali Babacan, a former deputy prime minister under Erdogan who was regarded as the "economy czar."

"The people are paying a high cost (for Erdogan's policies) in the form of hardship and poverty," added Babacan, who has since formed his own party.

WHAT IS ERDOGAN DOING TO FIX THE SITUATION?

Faced with a rapidly crashing currency but determined not to raise interest rates, Erdogan announced a program last month meant to encourage people to convert foreign currency into lira and keep their savings in Turkish money.

Under the "exchange rate-protected deposit" system, the government guarantees it will cover losses should the interest they receive when the account matures be less than what they would have earned by keeping the savings in foreign currency.

The lira, which had dropped to an all-time low of 18 against the dollar, rallied after the announcement to around 11.

Since then, the government extended the program to corporate accounts. The central bank said exporters would be required to exchange 25% of their foreign currency revenue into liras. And the government increased contributions to private pension plans.

It also said it was raising the minimum wage by 50%. But simultaneously, it raised gas and electricity prices by 50% for low-consumption households and by 125% for those using more.

ARE THE EFFORTS WORKING?

Erdogan maintains that the lira deposit system is a success.

"We are pleased with the trust our citizens have shown in the exchange rate-protected deposits. We are pleased with the decrease in volatility in exchange rates and continued stability," the state-run Anadolu Agency quoted him as saying this week.

Treasury and Finance Minister Nureddin Nebati says people have deposited 131 billion lira (\$9.67 billion) into such accounts so far.

Babacan insists Turkish investors are holding on to their foreign currencies and just switching any existing lira deposits into accounts under the program.

"There is no incentive for those who have foreign currency to change it (into liras)," he said on Turkey's Fox TV.

Babacan and many others assert that the lira's spectacular rally last month wasn't due to the government's program, but to the central bank selling billions of U.S. dollars from its dwindling reserves to bolster the Turkish currency.

"When we took a look, we saw that on that night, and the following few days, the central bank furiously sold dollars through the backdoor," Babacan said. "In December, the central bank sold \$17 billion. Of the 17 billion, 9 billion were sold through covert measures."

Nebati has rejected the claims: "Thousands of individual sellers stepped in. They competed with each other. People raced to exchange their currency."

The lira, meanwhile, has lost some of its gains, slipping to around 13.50 lira per dollar.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS GOING FORWARD?

The deposit system has provided a respite for Erdogan, ending the lira's excessive volatility even though the shift to exchange rate-protected accounts is limited. But analysts fear the program will create ad-

ditional long-term economic woes.

Should the lira fall again, Turkey's treasury would have to foot the bill for exchange rate losses, further increasing inflation and financially burdening the government, they say.

"The fact that these deposits are tied to foreign currency puts the central bank and the treasury under an unquantifiable burden," Babacan said.

Economist Ozlem Derici Sengul agreed.

"If we see a depreciation in the currency, the treasury will have to pay the difference between deposits' return and the depreciation. That will put additional burden over public finances," she said.

Experts also note the government hasn't devised a plan to control inflation.

"Inflation is the real risk, of course, because the monetary policy is quite loose," said Sengul, founding partner at Istanbul-based Spinn Consulting. "The inflationary pressures are not likely to disappear easily unless you follow a quite tight monetary policy."

Erdogan insists his policies are combating high prices.

"As a matter of fact, the result is showing itself. Inflation has started to decline and will continue to do so," he said.

US, allies pledge unity on Russia; to do what isn't as clear

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER and LORNE COOK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden has rallied European allies to pledge as one that they will take tough measures against Russia if it rolls troops into Ukraine. But when it comes to what exactly the United States and Europe are willing to do, the allies don't look as ringingly united.

Militarily, for example, the United States, Turkey and Britain have stood out for supplying or agreeing to supply anti-tank missiles, armed drones, naval warships and other weapons, along with money to help Ukraine build its defenses. But key ally Germany appears averse to any such direct military aid — so much so that a British military flight taking weapons to Ukraine on Monday flew around German airspace rather than taking the most direct route through it.

While Biden has warned Russian President Vladimir Putin of economic consequences "like none he's ever seen" if Russia invades Ukraine, some major European allies have demonstrated less enthusiasm for huge economic penalties, which could damage some European economies, or put in jeopardy the Russian natural gas Europeans need to stay warm this winter.

During weeks of intense diplomacy, Russian leaders have dismissed the allies' pledge of a united stand against Russia. In reality, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov protested, it's the U.S. calling the shots, the Europeans falling in line.

And if talk of unity and the promises of repercussions is making Putin think twice, he's not showing it.

Russia has sent some 100,000 troops toward the Ukrainian border, and U.S. officials said Tuesday they believed Russia was capable of launching an attack. Secretary of State Antony Blinken was making a hastily planned trip to Ukraine and Germany ahead of talks with Lavrov in Geneva on Friday.

European Union leaders see Russia as trying to sow discord among the 27-nation EU, the United States and NATO. By last week, they were congratulating themselves on avoiding that trap.

"The United States didn't play their game," EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said. "Russia wanted to divide us. They failed."

At least in words, the lining up of Europeans behind U.S. leadership has been a foreign policy success for the Biden administration after it led global allies in a withdrawal from Afghanistan with damaging results.

U.S. work nailing down European commitments against Russia if it invades will continue, said Sen. Chris Murphy, a Connecticut Democrat who traveled with Republican and Democratic senators to Kyiv to meet with Ukrainian leaders last weekend.

"Right now there seems to be slightly greater interest coming from the United States on implementing tough multilateral sanctions than from Europe," Murphy told reporters Monday. That's "somewhat stunning to me, given the territorial integrity of Europe, not the United States, is at stake."

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In October and November, France, Germany and some others in the EU questioned U.S. warnings that Russia's military buildup near Ukraine could signal an imminent invasion. France and Germany initially opposed activating NATO's crisis response planning system. They relented, and it was activated Nov. 30.

U.S. allies now seem determined to prove they're in lock-step with Biden. Publicly, there's virtually no dissent from the pledges of tough action.

A Russian invasion of Ukraine would likely trigger the immediate bolstering of defenses of NATO members close to Russia's borders, like Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. NATO already has about 5,000 troops and equipment deployed in those countries. The presence of NATO members along Russia's borders already is one of Putin's central complaints against the West.

Countries in southeast Europe — Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey, in particular — are also being sounded out about their willingness to potentially host a NATO battle group of around 1,000 troops and equipment in the Black Sea region.

"There is a number of nations that are interested then in hosting those forces," Admiral Rob Bauer, the head of NATO's military committee, said last week.

Since it's not a member of NATO, Ukraine can expect no military help from the alliance as an organization if Russia invades.

Among the European Union and individual European governments, the rhetoric matches that from the White House and Americans: Russia would incur enormous costs of an economic and political nature if Putin sent his forces across the border into Ukraine.

No leaders are publicly discussing the precise nature of possible sanctions, saying it would be a mistake to show their hand. The EU has a track record of slapping sanctions on Russia in unison with the U.S., the U.K, Canada and other allies.

The most talked-about actions include banning Russia from the SWIFT banking system that handles the flow of money around the world and imposing sanctions on Putin's family, his military and political circles and Russian banks.

The British government has lined up firmly behind the tough U.S. line on Ukraine. Prime Minister Boris Johnson spoke to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy last week to back "wide-ranging economic sanctions" should Russia invade, Johnson's office said.

But there are questions about how much economic pain Britain is willing to inflict on London's financial district and property market, which are hubs for Russian money. U.K. banks and financial authorities have long been accused of turning a blind eye to ill-gotten gains.

After France emerged as one of the initial skeptics of the U.S. warnings over Russia's troop buildup, the government minister for European affairs, Clément Beaune, recently said France is ready to support sanctions against Russia if needed. He did not elaborate.

Germany, the largest economy in Europe, holds one of the greatest pieces of economic leverage over Russia — a newly built pipeline, Nord Stream 2, that would deliver Russian natural gas directly to Germany and beyond.

Germany's foreign minister, Annalena Baerbock, said Monday that her country "will do everything to guarantee the security of Ukraine."

"Any further escalation would carry a high price for the Russian regime — economic, political and strategic," she said. "And we're very serious about this."

But Germany's government has given mixed signals, and no definitive public word, on whether it would keep the pipeline offline if Russia sends troops into Ukraine. That's left Blinken to give assurances in Germany's stead, saying "it would be difficult to see" gas flowing if Russia invades.

Family seeks to sue Lebanon over dead father's captivity

By KATHY McCORMACK and JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

CONCORD, N.H. (AP) — A Lebanese American man's survivors, who filed an ambitious lawsuit last year alleging Lebanon's security agency kidnapped and tortured him before he died in the U.S., hope to find

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an opening after the agency recently responded in an American court.

Amer Fakhoury died in the United States in August 2020 at age 57 after suffering from stage 4 lymphoma. His family's suit says he developed the illness and other serious medical issues while imprisoned during a visit to Lebanon over decades-old murder and torture charges that he denied.

Fakhoury's detention in 2019 and release in 2020 marked another strain in relations between the United States and Lebanon, which finds itself beset by one of the world's worst economic disasters and squeezed by tensions between Washington and Iran.

Recently, lawyers representing Lebanon's security agency, the General Directorate of General Security, asked to intervene in the Fakhoury family's wrongful death lawsuit to have the allegations against it stricken. Lebanon is not named as a defendant in the suit, which targets Iran.

In its filing, the Lebanese security agency claimed the lawsuit falsely accuses it and its director of "serious crimes of kidnapping, torture and killing at the direction or aid of alleged terrorist organizations."

In turn, the Fakhourys' lawyer, Robert Tolchin, has asked a judge for permission to formally sue Lebanon, along with Iran. He referred to Lebanon's action in the family's response as "a very strange and unusual motion filed by a nonparty."

The family's lawsuit filed in Washington in May initially argued it was possible to sue Iran under an exception to the Foreign Sovereign Immunities Act as it has been designated as a "state sponsor of terrorism" since 1984. The suit also described Hezbollah, now both a dominant political and militant force in Lebanon, as an "instrument" of Iran.

Iran has yet to respond to the lawsuit. It has ignored others filed against it in American courts in the wake of the 1979 Islamic Revolution and U.S. Embassy hostage crisis. Iran's mission to the United Nations did not respond to a request for comment.

Similar lawsuits against Iran have won financial judgments, though receiving a payout can be complicated. Any award could come from the United States Victims of State Sponsored Terrorism Fund, which has distributed funds to those held and or affected by the hostage crisis.

Regarding Lebanon, Tolchin said the Fakhourys' lawsuit would not make sense without the allegations against Lebanon's security agency.

"We interpret that as a waiver of sovereign immunity," he said to The Associated Press of the agency's request. "You can't come in and ask for affirmative relief on the merits, and, at the same time, claim to be immune."

In a statement provided to The AP, an attorney for the agency, David Lin, said the Fakhourys' position "that Lebanon or our client somehow waived sovereign immunity by seeking to strike baseless material from the complaint is baffling and wrong as a matter of law."

The lawyers representing the agency face a Wednesday deadline to respond to the Fakhoury's request to sue.

Mary Ellen O'Connell, a professor at the Notre Dame Law School, said it may be challenging for a case to be brought against Lebanon, which is not designated a "state sponsor of terrorism."

"Not having that listing will be difficult to go after Lebanon, as opposed to Iran," she said.

O'Connell also said a move like Lebanon's to strike the allegations "is usually not accepted by the courts as a waiver" of sovereign immunity.

Fakhoury's imprisonment in Lebanon took place in September 2019, not long after he became an American citizen. Fakhoury visited his home country on vacation for the first time in nearly 20 years. A week after he arrived, he was jailed and his passport was seized, his family has said.

The day before he was taken into custody, a newspaper close to the Iranian-backed Shiite group Hezbollah published a story accusing him of playing a role in the torture and killing of inmates at a prison run by an Israeli-backed Lebanese militia during Israel's occupation of Lebanon two decades ago. Fakhoury was a member of the South Lebanon Army.

The article dubbed him the "butcher" of the Khiam Detention Center, which was notorious for human rights abuses. Fakhoury's family said he had worked at the prison as a member of the militia, but that he was a clerk who had little contact with inmates. When Israel withdrew from Lebanon in 2000, Fakhoury

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left the country like many other militia members who feared reprisals.

Upon his return to Lebanon in 2019, Fakhoury was held for five months before he was formally charged, his family said. By then, he had dropped more than 60 pounds, was suffering from lymphoma, and had rib fractures, among other serious health problems, they said.

In its request to intervene, the security agency said Fakhoury was not kidnapped, but was "lawfully detained" for investigative purposes and then "handed off" to another agency responsible for prosecuting the alleged crimes. It called the allegations "scandalous, impertinent, and highly damaging."

The family's suit alleges security personnel made him watch as they beat prisoners and kept him isolated in an interrogation room, where he faced verbal and physical abuse with a black sack placed over his head. The lawsuit also claims Fakhoury was threatened with execution unless he signed a declaration saying he was guilty of the accusations mentioned in the newspaper article.

Eventually, the Lebanese Supreme Court dropped the charges against Fakhoury. He was returned to the United States on March 19, 2020, on a U.S. Marine Corps Osprey aircraft. He died five months later.

The lawsuit also linked Fakhoury's eventual release to the U.S. government's decision in June 2020 to free Kassim Tajideen, a Lebanese businessman who was sentenced to five years in prison for providing millions of dollars to Hezbollah.

The Fakhourys' suit called it a "quid-pro-quo prisoner exchange." However, Tajideen's lawyer and the U.S. State Department at the time denied he was part of a prisoner exchange.

Fakhoury first arrived in the United States in 2001. He started a restaurant in Dover, New Hampshire, with his wife and put their four daughters through college. But his family said he felt Lebanon was still home, even though other members of his militia had been targeted in the years after the war.

As early as 2018, Fakhoury had sought assurances from the U.S. State Department and the Lebanese government that he could visit Lebanon freely. His family said he was told there were no accusations against him in Lebanon or no legal matters that might interfere with his return.

After his death, the Fakhourys started a foundation in his name dedicated to helping the families of hostages.

"This is a fight not just for us," Guila Fakhoury, the oldest of Fakhoury's four daughters, said in an interview about the lawsuit. "This a fight for our father and a fight for every American who is illegally detained, and for every person who is illegally detained."

The lawsuit seeks financial damages and a jury trial.

"I know my dad will not rest in peace until we have justice for what has been done to him," Fakhoury said.

Pfizer chief Albert Bourla wins \$1 million Genesis Prize

By JOSEF FEDERMAN Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Albert Bourla, chairman and chief executive of global pharmaceutical giant Pfizer Inc., was awarded on Wednesday the prestigious Genesis Prize for his efforts in leading the development of a COVID-19 vaccine.

The \$1 million award is granted each year to a person for their professional achievements, contributions to humanity and commitment to Jewish values. The Genesis Prize Foundation said Bourla had received the largest number of votes in an online campaign in which some 200,000 people in 71 countries participated.

It commended him for his "leadership, determination, and especially for his willingness to assume great risks." It cited Pfizer's decision to turn down U.S. government funding early in the pandemic, a decision that helped the company reduce bureaucracy and expedite development of the vaccine.

Its partner, BioNTech, received funding from the German government, and Pfizer later signed a large supply contract with the United States. The strategy put Pfizer at the forefront of global efforts to fight the coronavirus, with its vaccine the first to be authorized for use in the U.S. and Europe.

The Greek-born Bourla, the son of Holocaust survivors, plans to donate his prize to projects aimed at preserving the memory of Holocaust victims, especially in Greece, the foundation said. Bourla's parents were among the few survivors of Thessaloniki's Jewish community, which was all but wiped out by the

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Nazis during World War II.

In a statement issued by the foundation, Bourla said he was accepting the prize "humbly and on behalf of all my Pfizer colleagues who answered the urgent call of history."

"I was brought up in a Jewish family who believed that each of us is only as strong as the bonds of our community; and that we are all called upon by God to repair the world," he said.

Pfizer's vaccine was the first to win U.S. approval for emergency use in December 2020, and Israel quickly became one of the first countries to inoculate its population with the vaccine. It later struck a deal with the drug maker to exchange vast troves of data with the company in exchange for continued supplies of what was then a hard-to-get vaccine.

The deal helped turn Israel into an early global leader in the fight against COVID-19 and has provided valuable data for researchers — though it also was criticized by some on privacy grounds and for shining a light on disparities in access to vaccines between rich and poor countries.

Bourla joins a list of business leaders, artists and entertainers to win the prize. Last year's winner was Hollywood mogul Steven Spielberg.

Previous winners have included businessman and former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, actor Michael Douglas, violinist Itzhak Perlman, sculptor Sir Anish Kapoor, actress Natalie Portman; New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft and former Soviet political prisoner Natan Sharansky.

In 2018, Portman snubbed the prize ceremony because she did not want to appear to be endorsing then-Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The same year, the late U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg was granted a special lifetime achievement award.

The prize was inaugurated in 2014 and is run in a partnership between the private Genesis Prize Foundation and the chairman's office of the Jewish Agency, a nonprofit group that has close ties to the Israeli government. It is funded by a \$100 million endowment established by the foundation.

The prize is usually awarded in Jerusalem each June at a dinner attended by Israel's prime minister. But the ceremony has been called off the past two years due to the pandemic.

Bourla said he hopes to travel to Jerusalem this summer for the event.

EXPLAINER: Why Tonga eruption was so big and what's next

By NICK PERRY Associated Press

WELLINGTON, New Zealand (AP) — People around the world looked on in awe at the spectacular satellite images of an undersea volcano erupting in a giant mushroom cloud in the Pacific. Many wondered why the blast was so big, how the resulting tsunami traveled so far, and what will happen next. New Zealand scientists Shane Cronin, a volcanology professor at the University of Auckland, and Emily Lane, a tsunami expert at the National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research, help explain.

EXPLOSIVE BUT BRIEF

The eruption on Saturday was incredibly explosive but also relatively brief. The plume rose into the air more than 30 kilometers (19 miles) but the eruption lasted only about 10 minutes, unlike some big eruptions that can continue for hours. Cronin said the power of the eruption of the Hunga Tonga Hunga Ha'apai volcano ranks among the world's biggest over the past 30 years, and the height of the plume of ash, steam and gas was comparable with the huge 1991 eruption of Mount Pinatubo in the Philippines, which killed several hundred people.

WHY SO BIG?

The magma inside the volcano was under enormous pressure and had gasses trapped within it. A fracture in the rock likely induced a sudden drop in pressure, allowing the gas to expand and blast the magma apart. Cronin said the crater was sitting about 200 meters (650 feet) below the sea surface, a kind of Goldilocks depth for a big explosion in which seawater pours into the volcano and turns instantly into steam, adding to the rapid expansion and energy of the explosion. Any deeper and the extra pressure of the water would have helped contain the eruption.

FARFLUNG TSUNAMI

Many scientists were surprised that a single eruption could produce a Pacific-wide tsunami of about 1

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meter (3 feet) that smashed boats in New Zealand and caused an oil spill and two drownings in Peru. Lane said that oceanwide tsunamis are usually triggered by earthquakes that extend across huge areas rather than from a single volcano, essentially a tiny dot in the ocean. She said other factors may have been at play, such as an underwater flank of the volcano collapsing and displacing water. She said one interesting theory is that the shock wave, or sonic boom, from the volcano that traveled twice around the world may have pumped more power into the tsunami waves.

TONGA MAINLY SPARED

Another mystery is why the tsunami wasn't bigger and more destructive in Tonga, which sits almost on top of the volcano.

"That's the million dollar question," Cronin said. "Looking at the images so far, the level of devastation is less than I was fearing."

Authorities by Wednesday had confirmed three deaths in Tonga, with concerns remaining about people on some of the hard-hit smaller islands. Dozens of homes were destroyed.

Lane said that Tongans at least got some warning, both from the increased activity at the volcano the day before the eruption and from the incredibly loud bang when it erupted but before the tsunami hit, allowing many to scramble to higher ground. She said reefs, lagoons and other natural features may also have protected parts of Tonga, while amplifying the waves in certain areas.

FALLING ASH

The ash that has coated Tonga is acidic but not poisonous, Cronin said. Indeed, he has been advising Pacific responders that people may still be able to drink from their rainwater supplies even if some ash has fallen in, which will make the water more acidic and salty. He said it was a question of applying the taste test and if water became scarce, it would be better drinking ash-tainted water than stagnant water that might be contaminated with bacteria. New Zealand and other nations are trying to get water and other supplies to Tonga as quickly as possible. Cronin said all of Tonga's soil comes from volcanic ash and the latest dump of ash would quickly wash into the ground and make the nation more fertile.

NO GLOBAL COOLING

Huge volcanic eruptions can sometimes cause temporary global cooling as sulfur dioxide is pumped into the stratosphere. But in the case of the Tonga eruption, initial satellite measurements indicated the amount of sulfur dioxide released would only have a tiny effect of perhaps 0.01 degree Celsius (0.02 Fahrenheit) global average cooling, said Alan Robock, a professor at Rutgers University.

WHAT'S NEXT

Cronin envisions two main scenarios for the volcano. The first is that it has exhausted itself for now and will go quiet for the next 10 to 20 years as magma slowly returns. A second scenario is that new magma rises up quickly to replace that which exploded, in which case there might be ongoing eruptions. But he believes the cracks and rifts caused by Saturday's big explosion will allow more gas to escape, and subsequent eruptions won't be as big, at least for now. Both Cronin and Lane agree there needs to be much better monitoring of the volcano — and others in Tonga — to help better predict future events.

Influential fashion journalist André Leon Talley dies at 73

NEW YORK (AP) — André Leon Talley, the towering former creative director and editor at large of Vogue magazine, has died. He was 73.

Talley's literary agent David Vigliano confirmed Talley's death to USA Today late Tuesday, but no additional details were immediately available.

Talley was an influential fashion journalist who worked at Women's Wear Daily and Vogue and was a regular in the front row of fashion shows in New York and Europe. At 6-feet-6 inches tall, Talley cut an imposing figure wherever he went, with his stature, his considerable influence on the fashion world, and his bold looks.

In a 2013 Vanity Fair spread titled "The Eyeful Tower," Talley was described as "perhaps the industry's most important link to the past." Designer Tom Ford told the magazine Talley was "one of the last great fashion editors who has an incredible sense of fashion history. ... He can see through everything you do

to the original reference, predict what was on your inspiration board.”

Designer Diane von Furstenberg praised Talley on Instagram, writing: “no one saw the world in a more glamorous way than you did ... no one was grander and more soulful than you were.”

In his 2003 memoir, “A.L.T.: A Memoir,” Talley focused on two of the most important women in his life: his maternal grandmother, Bennie Frances Davis and the late fashion editor Diana Vreeland.

“Bennie Frances Davis may have looked like a typical, African American domestic worker to many of the people who saw her on an ordinary day, but I, who could see her soul, could also see her secret: that even while she wore a hair net and work clothes to scrub toilets and floors, she wore an invisible diadem,” he wrote.

His relationship with Vogue started at Duke University, where his grandmother cleaned dorms; Talley would walk to campus in his youth to read the magazine.

Talley was also a familiar figure to TV audiences, serving as a judge on “America’s Top Model” and appearing on “Sex and the City” and “Empire.”

Raised in Durham, North Carolina, Talley worked assorted jobs before arriving in New York in the 1970s, soon meeting Vreeland striking up a friendship that lasted until her death in 1989.

Talley worked as a park ranger in Washington, D.C., and Maryland, where he told visitors about slaves who built Fort Washington and dressed up like a Civil War soldier, he told The Associated Press in 2003.

After stints with Interview magazine and Women’s Wear Daily, Talley was hired at Vogue in 1983 by Editor in Chief Anna Wintour and was appointed its creative director in 1988.

Talley released another memoir in 2020, “The Chiffon Trenches,” that included gossipy behind-the-scenes tales about Wintour and other fashion figures like the late designer Karl Lagerfeld.

Of all the elements of a person’s apparel, Talley considered shoes to be most important.

“You can tell everything about a person by what he puts on his feet,” Talley told the AP.

“If it’s a man and you can see the reflection of his face on the top of his black shoes, it means they’ve been polished to perfection. ... If it’s a woman and she’s wearing shoes that hurt ... well, shoes that hurt are very fashionable!”

Talley’s death was first reported by celebrity website TMZ.

Is it better to wear an N95 or cloth mask right now?

By EMMA H. TOBIN Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Is it better to wear an N95 or cloth mask right now?

Health experts suggest stepping up protection against the highly contagious omicron variant with stronger masks such as N95s or KN95s.

It’s especially important now with health care systems under strain, and with people in higher-risk situations such as crowded, indoor settings for extended periods, says Linsey Marr, who studies viruses at Virginia Tech.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently updated its guidance to recommend the kinds of masks used by health care workers, but also noted it’s important to pick a mask that fits well and that you’ll wear consistently.

“Our main message continues to be that any mask is better than no mask,” CDC spokeswoman Kristen Nordlund said in a statement.

Previously, the CDC had said N95 masks should be reserved for health care workers because of supply shortages. There’s a special category of “surgical N95” masks that are generally not available for sale to the public that the CDC says should continued to be reserved for health care settings.

N95s have a tighter fit to your face than cloth masks and are made with a special material designed to block 95% of harmful particles. The fibers are pressed closer together than in cloth masks and have an electrostatic charge that attracts molecules to stick to the mask rather than passing through.

KN95s and KF94s offer a similar level of protection. A full list of masks that meet an international quality standard is available on the CDC website.

But be careful when buying. The counterfeit market is huge, and about 60% of KN95s in the U.S. are fake and do not meet quality standards, according to the CDC.

It's hard to tell just by looking if a mask is counterfeit, so experts suggest buying directly from reputable sellers. Project N95 is also a known seller of valid brands, and Marr says she buys masks through industrial suppliers like Grainger or McMaster-Carr.

If you find certain N95s difficult to wear for long periods, experts suggest exploring the different shapes and styles available to see what works best for you.

Rudy Giuliani among Trump allies subpoenaed by Jan. 6 panel

By FARNOUSH AMIRI and COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House committee investigating the U.S. Capitol insurrection issued subpoenas to Rudy Giuliani and other members of Donald Trump's legal team who filed bogus legal challenges to the 2020 election that fueled the lie that race had been stolen from the former president.

The committee is continuing to widen its scope into Trump's orbit, on Tuesday demanding information and testimony from Giuliani, Jenna Ellis, Sidney Powell and Boris Epshteyn. All four publicly pushed Trump's baseless voter fraud claims in the months after the election.

"The four individuals we've subpoenaed today advanced unsupported theories about election fraud, pushed efforts to overturn the election results, or were in direct contact with the former President about attempts to stop the counting of electoral votes," Mississippi Rep. Bennie Thompson, Democratic chairman of the panel, said in a statement.

Epshteyn in a tweet called the committee illegitimate and its efforts part of a "witch hunt" against Trump and his supporters. The others who were subpoenaed did not respond to messages seeking comment.

Trump's legal team sought to overturn the election results in the battleground states by filing lawsuits alleging widespread irregularities with ballots and claims by partisan poll watchers who said they couldn't see everything going on, in part because of precautions taken as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. More than 50 lawsuits were filed, mostly in battleground states.

The lawsuits were soundly batted down in the courts, sometimes within days of filing. But the legal challenges and the multiple press conferences held by Giuliani and others helped galvanize Trump supporters behind the idea that the election had been stolen, even though Trump's own attorney general said there was no evidence of widespread fraud, and local officials said it had been the most secure election in history.

The committee said it is seeking records and deposition testimony from Giuliani, the 76-year-old former New York City mayor once celebrated for his leadership after 9/11, over his promotion of election fraud claims on behalf of Trump. The panel is also seeking information about Giuliani's reported efforts to persuade state legislators to take steps to overturn the election results.

Also on Tuesday, the Justice Department notified a federal appeals court that it planned to turn over some Trump records sought by the Jan. 6 committee by 6 p.m. Wednesday barring a new court order.

Trump sued last year to try to stop the committee from receiving notes and other documents even after Biden waived executive privilege. While the federal appeals court in Washington rejected Trump's request, the court delayed any release of records while the U.S. Supreme Court considers the case.

The Justice Department argued Tuesday that the appeals court opinion doesn't cover a batch of records for which Biden waived executive privilege after Trump originally sued. It said Trump had been given 30 days' notice in mid-December to seek a new stay. The appeals court could still intervene to block any release.

Four days after the Nov. 3, 2020, election, while The Associated Press and other media outlets were calling it for Joe Biden, Giuliani held a press conference at a landscaping company in Philadelphia to announce his team planned to challenge the election results. It was the beginning of a pressure campaign to allot electoral votes in battleground states where Biden won over to Trump instead.

Ellis and Powell also appeared with Giuliani at press conferences, pushing false claims of election fraud, and Giuliani met with local elected officials to push false theories about corrupt voting systems. Powell was

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eventually removed from the team after she said in an interview she was going to release “the kraken” of lawsuits.

Giuliani even appeared in a Pennsylvania courtroom for the first time in nearly three decades to argue an election case. During the course of the hearing, he fiddled with his Twitter account, forgot which judge he was talking to and threw around false accusations about a nationwide conspiracy by Democrats to steal the election.

The lawsuit had been Trump’s best-case scenario to overturn the election using the courts — not because of the facts of the case but because of the number of electoral votes at stake, 20.

“One might expect that when seeking such a startling outcome, a plaintiff would come formidably armed with compelling legal arguments and factual proof of rampant corruption,” Judge Matthew Brann wrote at the time. “That has not happened.”

Giuliani was a reliable cheerleader for Trump through much of his presidency, serving on his legal team during special counsel Robert Mueller’s Russia investigation and defending him in repeated television news appearances. But he also found himself personally entangled in Trump’s own political and legal woes.

He was a central character in the first impeachment case against Trump, focused around the former president’s efforts to get Ukraine to dig up dirt on Democratic challenger Joe Biden and his son Hunter. Federal investigators last year raided Giuliani’s home in New York as part of an investigation into his own Ukraine work.

And Giuliani spoke at the rally in front of the White House that preceded the Jan. 6 insurrection. Like Trump, he suggested the certification of Biden’s victory was an existential crisis for the country and used rhetoric that alluded to violence.

“Let’s have trial by combat,” Giuliani said. “I’m willing to stake my reputation, the President is willing to stake his reputation, on the fact that we’re going to find criminality there.”

His speech came after dozens of judges — including the U.S. Supreme Court, with three Trump nominees — rejected every significant claim of alleged voter fraud brought by Giuliani and other lawyers. More than a year later, there still is no evidence of criminality. Even a widely criticized review ordered by Republicans in Arizona, one of the states Biden flipped to Democrats in 2020, did not produce proof to support Trump’s false claims.

The nine-member panel is also demanding information from Ellis, a legal adviser who the lawmakers say reportedly prepared and circulated two memos that analyzed the constitutional authority for then-Vice President Mike Pence to reject or delay counting the electoral votes from states that had submitted alternate slates of electors. Pence said he had no such authority.

Besides Giuliani, Powell was the most public face of Trump’s attempts to contest the election, routinely making appearances on behalf of the president.

In numerous interviews and appearances post-election, Powell continued to make misleading statements about the voting process, unfurled unsupported and complex conspiracy theories involving communist regimes and vowed to “blow up” Georgia with a “biblical” court filing.

Powell and another pro-Trump lawyer — Lin Wood, not yet named by the committee — were eventually ordered to pay \$175,000 by a court after they filed frivolous election lawsuits in Michigan.

The last person subpoenaed Tuesday by the committee is Epshteyn, a former Trump campaign strategic adviser, who reportedly attended meetings at the Willard Hotel in the days leading up to the insurrection. The committee said Epshteyn had a call with Trump on the morning of Jan. 6, 2021, to discuss options to delay the certification of election results in the event of Pence’s unwillingness to deny or delay the process.

Big voting bill faces defeat as 2 Dems won’t stop filibuster

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — Voting legislation that Democrats and civil rights leaders say is vital for protecting democracy appeared headed for defeat as the Senate churned into debate, a devastating setback enabled by President Joe Biden’s own party as two holdout senators refuse to support rule changes to

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overcome a Republican filibuster.

The Democratic senators, Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona and Joe Manchin of West Virginia, faced strong criticism from Black leaders and civil rights organizations for failing to take on what critics call the "Jim Crow filibuster."

The debate carries echoes of an earlier era when the Senate filibuster was deployed in lengthy speeches by opponents of civil rights legislation. It comes as Democrats and other voting advocates nationwide warn that Republican-led states are passing laws making it more difficult for Black Americans and others to vote by consolidating polling locations, requiring certain types of identification and ordering other changes.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer acknowledged the current bill's likely defeat this week. But he said the fight is not over as he heeds advocates' call to force all senators to go on record with their positions.

"We ain't giving up," Schumer said after a Tuesday evening strategy meeting. "It is a fight for the soul and the future of America."

This is the fifth time the Senate will try to pass voting legislation this Congress.

The Freedom to Vote: John R. Lewis Act combines earlier bills into one package that would make Election Day a national holiday, ensure access to early voting and mail-in ballots — which have become especially popular during the COVID-19 pandemic — and enable the Justice Department to intervene in states with a history of voter interference, among other changes.

Both Manchin and Sinema say they support the package, which has passed the House, but they are unwilling to change the Senate rules to muscle it through that chamber over Republican objections. With a 50-50 split, Democrats have a narrow Senate majority — Vice President Kamala Harris can break a tie — but they lack the 60 votes needed to overcome the GOP filibuster.

Instead, Schumer announced the Senate will vote on a more specific rules change for a "talking filibuster" on this one bill — requiring senators to stand at their desks and argue their views, rather than the current practice that simply allows senators to privately signal their objections.

Initial voting could start as soon as Wednesday. But even the proposal for a "talking filibuster" is expected to fail, since Manchin and Sinema have said they are unwilling to change the rules on a party-line vote by Democrats alone.

Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell, who led his party in doing away with the filibuster's 60-vote threshold for Supreme Court nominees during Donald Trump's presidency, warned off changing the rules again. He said Tuesday it would "break the Senate."

Democratic senators countered in speeches from the Senate floor that with Republicans objecting to the voting legislation they have no choice.

Manchin did open the door to a more tailored package of voting law changes — including to the Electoral College Act, which became a focus of the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection at the Capitol — that he said a bipartisan group of senators are working on and could draw Republican support.

"There are so many things that we can agree on," he said, though he held firm against voting to change the filibuster rules.

Just as Manchin and Sinema blocked Biden's broad "Build Back Better" domestic spending package, the two senators are now dashing hopes for another major part of Biden's presidential agenda. They are infuriating many of their colleagues and faced a barrage of criticism during Martin Luther King Jr. Day events.

Martin Luther King III, the son of the late civil rights leader, compared Sinema and Manchin to the white moderates his father wrote about during the civil rights battles of the 1950s and 1960s — who declared support for the goals of Black voting rights but not the direct actions or demonstrations that ultimately led to passage of landmark legislation.

"History will not remember them kindly," the younger King said, referring to Sinema and Manchin by name.

Once reluctant himself to change Senate rules, Biden used the King holiday to press senators to do just that. But the push from the White House, including Biden's blistering speech last week in Atlanta comparing opponents to segregationists, is seen as too late, coming as the president ends his first year

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in office with his popularity sagging.

"The president's view is that the American people deserve to see where their leaders stand on protecting their fundamental rights," said White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki.

The Senate launched the days-long debate, but the outcome is expected to be no different from past failed votes on the legislation. Biden has been unable to persuade Sinema and Manchin to join other Democrats to change the rules to lower the 60-vote threshold. In fact, Sinema upstaged the president last week, reiterating her opposition to the rules changes just before Biden arrived on Capitol Hill to court senators' votes.

Both senators have argued that preserving the filibuster rules is important for fostering bipartisanship. They also warn of what would happen if Republicans win back majority control, as is distinctly possible this election year.

McConnell has argued the broad package now before the Senate is a federal overreach into state-run elections, and he harshly criticized Biden's speech last week as "unpresidential."

Leading sports figures from Manchin's home state of West Virginia also have weighed in. In a letter last week, University of Alabama football coach Nick Saban, NBA Hall of Famer Jerry West and others urged him to support the legislation.

The political group Emily's List said it won't endorse Sinema if she cannot support a path forward for the voting bill.

Before Republicans lowered the vote threshold for Trump's Supreme Court nominees, Democrats had similarly dropped it to a simple majority for confirmation of administrative positions and lower court nominees. It typically takes a 67-vote supermajority to change party rules, but both were done on party-line votes.

The voting bill was the Democrats' top priority this Congress, and the House swiftly approved H.R. 1 only to see it languish in the Senate.

EXPLAINER: Why is filibuster such a barrier to voting bill?

By BRIAN SLODYSKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — For the fifth time in recent months, Senate Republicans are expected to block Democrats' sweeping voting legislation this week using a longstanding delaying tactic that can stop a bill in its tracks.

Democrats lament — this time — that Senate rules give outsize power to the chamber's minority. Yet they are hardly alone in their complaints about the tactic, known as the filibuster, which has been used since the 1800s to block legislation.

Here's a look at the filibuster, what it does and how it works.

WHAT'S A FILIBUSTER?

Unlike the House, the Senate places few constraints on lawmakers' right to speak. But senators can use the chamber's rules to hinder or block votes.

Collectively called filibusters, these procedural moves were emblazoned in the public's mind in part by the 1939 film, "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington," in which James Stewart portrayed a senator who spoke on the chamber's floor until exhaustion.

In a real-life version of that, Sen. Strom Thurmond, D-S.C., stood continuously by his desk for 24 hours and 18 minutes speaking against the 1957 Civil Rights Act. That's the longest Senate speech by a single senator for which there are such records.

Democrats say the GOP's current embrace of the tactic to block progress on their voting rights bill echoes that era. But there are key differences.

Most important, unlike in the 1960s, senators can usually tell Senate leaders or announce publicly that they will filibuster a bill and no lengthy speeches will be required. The system now allows the Senate to conduct other business even as a filibuster is waged.

HOW DID IT COME ABOUT?

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The term "filibuster" began appearing in the mid-19th century, derived from a Dutch term for "freebooter" and the Spanish "filibusteros," which were used to describe pirates, Senate records show.

The filibuster isn't in the Constitution and it wasn't part of the Founding Fathers' vision for the Senate. It was created inadvertently after Vice President Aaron Burr complained in 1805 that the chamber's rule book was redundant and overly complicated, according to historians. In a rules rewrite that followed, senators eliminated a provision that allowed for debate to be cut off. The filibuster was developed as a blocking tactic several decades later.

By the 1920s, it was part of an established playbook for stalling civil rights legislation.

HOW DO FILIBUSTERS END?

Complaints about the snail's pace of the Senate are as old as the republic, with records from the first Congress in 1789 indicating senators were annoyed by long speeches holding up proceedings.

But after filibusters became a turned-to tactic for limitless debate, the Senate voted in 1917 to let senators end them with a two-thirds majority vote.

In 1975, the Senate lowered that margin to the current three-fifths majority, which in the 100-member chamber means 60 votes are needed to end filibusters against nearly all types of legislation. Only simple majorities are required to end the delays against nominations, thanks to recent years' rule changes.

Filibusters have become routine against legislation in the past two decades, frustrating both parties. Before then, many of the most well-known filibusters dealt with voting rights.

—A 10-day filibuster in 1891 stopped a bill that would have appointed federal monitors to oversee all phases of elections, a measure vehemently opposed by senators from the South, where Blacks were denied the right to vote, congressional records show.

—Southern senators successfully filibustered an anti-lynching bill in 1922. They repeated that in 1938 with a 30-day filibuster.

—In 1942, a five-day filibuster by Southern senators killed a bill that would have eliminated poll taxes, which were used to disenfranchise Black voters. Similar legislation continued to spur filibuster challenges until poll taxes were eliminated in 1964.

—On Jun 10, 1964, after more than 14-hours of oration, Democratic West Virginia Sen. Robert Byrd brought a 60-day filibuster to a close. Minutes later, the Senate began to vote on the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to end segregation. It had become clear that backers had enough votes to cut off debate for the first time in Senate history for a filibuster of civil rights legislation.

WHAT DOES THIS HAVE TO DO WITH TODAY?

Characterizing debate on their current voting legislation as the civil rights fight of this era, Democrats say their bill is needed to counteract a Republican push for new state-level laws, which the Democrats say will make it more difficult to vote and in some cases make the administration of elections more susceptible to political influence.

The Democrats' bill would create national election standards that would trump the state-level GOP laws, which are being enacted in the name of election security, such as restrictions on mail voting or strict photo ID requirements.

It also aims to reduce the influence of big money in politics and limit partisan considerations in the drawing of congressional districts. It would restore the ability of the Justice Department to police election laws in states with a history of discrimination.

IS THERE ANY WAY AROUND THE FILIBUSTER?

In the 50-50 Senate, Democrats don't have enough votes to break a filibuster unless 10 Republicans join them.

But they could change Senate rules by invoking a so-called "nuclear option," which would then allow them to make changes to the filibuster with a simple majority of 51 votes. Both parties have used it to change the filibuster rules around nominees.

Many Democrats have urged the party to take this path, though they lack unanimous support in their caucus to do so. Their two most conservative senators, Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Arizona's Kyrsten

Sinema, oppose such changes, arguing the country is better served when Congress can find bipartisan solutions.

WHY ELSE ARE MANCHIN AND SINEMA OPPOSED?

Manchin and Sinema also argue changes to the filibuster would come back to haunt Democrats if Republicans gain control of Congress and the White House.

Someday soon, they warn, it could enable the GOP to pass an agenda with limited input from the minority — and herald an era of drastic reversals in federal policy any time one party gains control of the White House and both chambers of Congress.

WHY ARE REPUBLICANS AGAINST THE VOTING BILL?

Senate Republicans unanimously oppose the Democratic legislation, viewing it as federal overreach that would infringe on states' abilities to conduct their own elections.

They ridicule as "fake hysteria" the Democrats' claim that the bill is needed to repair electoral vulnerabilities exposed by Donald Trump's attempts to overthrow the 2020 election. They note that much of the current legislation was written years before.

Republicans also have been quick to point out that Democrats stridently opposed changes to the filibuster when they were in the minority, using it routinely to block legislation when Trump was president.

Big voting bill faces defeat as 2 Dems won't stop filibuster

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — Voting legislation that Democrats and civil rights leaders say is vital for protecting democracy appeared headed for defeat as the Senate churned into debate Tuesday, a devastating setback enabled by President Joe Biden's own party as two holdout senators refuse to support rule changes to overcome a Republican filibuster.

The Democratic senators, Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona and Joe Manchin of West Virginia, faced strong criticism from Black leaders and civil rights organizations for failing to take on what critics call the "Jim Crow filibuster."

The debate carries echoes of an earlier era when the Senate filibuster was deployed in lengthy speeches by opponents of civil rights legislation. It comes as Democrats and other voting advocates nationwide warn that Republican-led states are passing laws making it more difficult for Black Americans and others to vote by consolidating polling locations, requiring certain types of identification and ordering other changes.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer acknowledged the current bill's likely defeat this week. But he said the fight is not over as he heeds advocates' call to force all senators to go on record with their positions.

"We ain't giving up," Schumer said after an evening strategy meeting. "It is a fight for the soul and the future of America."

This is the fifth time the Senate will try to pass voting legislation this Congress.

The Freedom to Vote: John R. Lewis Act combines earlier bills into one package that would make Election Day a national holiday, ensure access to early voting and mail-in ballots — which have become especially popular during the COVID-19 pandemic — and enable the Justice Department to intervene in states with a history of voter interference, among other changes.

Both Manchin and Sinema say they support the package, which has passed the House, but they are unwilling to change the Senate rules to muscle it through that chamber over Republican objections. With a 50-50 split, Democrats have a narrow Senate majority — Vice President Kamala Harris can break a tie — but they lack the 60 votes needed to overcome the GOP filibuster.

Instead, Schumer announced the Senate will vote on a more specific rules change for a "talking filibuster" on this one bill — requiring senators to stand at their desks and argue their views, rather than the current practice that simply allows senators to privately signal their objections.

Initial voting could start as soon as Wednesday. But even the proposal for a "talking filibuster" is expected to fail, since Manchin and Sinema have said they are unwilling to change the rules on a party-line vote by Democrats alone.

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Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell, who led his party in doing away with the filibuster's 60-vote threshold for Supreme Court nominees during Donald Trump's presidency, warned off changing the rules again. He said Tuesday it would "break the Senate."

Democratic senators countered in speeches from the Senate floor that with Republicans objecting to the voting legislation they have no choice.

Manchin did open the door to a more tailored package of voting law changes — including to the Electoral College Act, which became a focus of the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection at the Capitol — that he said a bipartisan group of senators are working on and could draw Republican support.

"There are so many things that we can agree on," he said, though he held firm against voting to change the filibuster rules.

Just as Manchin and Sinema blocked Biden's broad "Build Back Better" domestic spending package, the two senators are now dashing hopes for another major part of Biden's presidential agenda. They are infuriating many of their colleagues and faced a barrage of criticism during Martin Luther King Jr. Day events.

Martin Luther King III, the son of the late civil rights leader, compared Sinema and Manchin to the white moderates his father wrote about during the civil rights battles of the 1950s and 1960s — who declared support for the goals of Black voting rights but not the direct actions or demonstrations that ultimately led to passage of landmark legislation.

"History will not remember them kindly," the younger King said, referring to Sinema and Manchin by name.

Once reluctant himself to change Senate rules, Biden used the King holiday to press senators to do just that. But the push from the White House, including Biden's blistering speech last week in Atlanta comparing opponents to segregationists, is seen as too late, coming as the president ends his first year in office with his popularity sagging.

"The president's view is that the American people deserve to see where their leaders stand on protecting their fundamental rights," said White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki.

The Senate launched the days-long debate, but the outcome is expected to be no different from past failed votes on the legislation. Biden has been unable to persuade Sinema and Manchin to join other Democrats to change the rules to lower the 60-vote threshold. In fact, Sinema upstaged the president last week, reiterating her opposition to the rules changes just before Biden arrived on Capitol Hill to court senators' votes.

Both senators have argued that preserving the filibuster rules is important for fostering bipartisanship. They also warn of what would happen if Republicans win back majority control, as is distinctly possible this election year.

McConnell has argued the broad package now before the Senate is a federal overreach into state-run elections, and he harshly criticized Biden's speech last week as "unpresidential."

Leading sports figures from Manchin's home state of West Virginia also have weighed in. In a letter last week, University of Alabama football coach Nick Saban, NBA Hall of Famer Jerry West and others urged him to support the legislation.

The political group Emily's List said it won't endorse Sinema if she cannot support a path forward for the voting bill.

Before Republicans lowered the vote threshold for Trump's Supreme Court nominees, Democrats had similarly dropped it to a simple majority for confirmation of administrative positions and lower court nominees. It typically takes a 67-vote supermajority to change party rules, but both were done on party-line votes.

The voting bill was the Democrats' top priority this Congress, and the House swiftly approved H.R. 1 only to see it languish in the Senate.

White House soft-launches COVID-19 test request website

By ZEKE MILLER and MATT O'BRIEN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration on Tuesday quietly launched its website for Americans to request free at-home COVID-19 tests, a day before the site was scheduled to officially go online.

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The website, COVIDTests.gov, now includes a link for "every home in the U.S." to access an order form run by the U.S. Postal Service. People can order four at-home tests per residential address, to be delivered by the Postal Service. It marks the latest step by President Joe Biden to address criticism of low inventory and long lines for testing during a nationwide surge in COVID-19 cases due to the omicron variant.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said the website was in "beta testing" and operating at a "limited capacity" ahead of its official launch. The website will officially launch midmorning Wednesday, Psaki said.

There were isolated reports Tuesday afternoon of problems relating to the website's address verification tool erroneously enforcing the four-per-household cap on apartment buildings and other multi-unit dwellings. A spokesperson for the Postal Service said in a statement that the error was "occurring in a small percentage of orders." He said any user needing assistance could file a service request at usps.com/s/the-postal-store-inquiry or contact a help desk at 1-800-ASK-USPS.

At points Tuesday more than 750,000 people were accessing the website at the same time, according to public government tracking data, but it was not immediately known how many orders were placed.

Psaki added that the administration was anticipating a "bug or two," but had IT experts from across the government working to get the site ready.

Biden announced last month that the U.S. would purchase 500 million at-home tests to launch the program and on Thursday the president announced that he was doubling the order to 1 billion tests.

But Americans shouldn't expect a rapid turnaround on the orders and they will have to plan ahead and request the tests well before they meet federal guidelines for when to use a test.

The White House said "tests will typically ship within 7- 12 days of ordering" through USPS, which reports shipping times of 1-3 days for its first-class package service in the continental United States.

Officials emphasized that the federal website is just one way for people to procure COVID-19 tests, and shortages of at-home test kits have shown signs of easing as more supply has hit the market.

Since Saturday, private insurance companies have been required to cover the cost of at-home rapid tests, allowing Americans to be reimbursed for tests they purchase at pharmacies and online retailers. That covers up to eight tests per month.

The technical bugs that embarrassed President Barack Obama's administration with the 2013 rollout of the HealthCare.gov website should not be a problem for the COVID-19 test kit website in part because it is so much simpler, said Alex Howard, director of the Digital Democracy Project, an open government watchdog group. Howard said the new website is also simpler than the Vaccines.gov website – for finding nearby vaccine clinics and pharmacies – that was already successfully launched by the Biden administration last year.

Howard said the task of requesting someone's address is a straightforward one, especially when compared with the Obama-era health insurance website that involved shopping for different health plans and authenticating a secure transaction. The challenge of hosting a website application under high demand is also a "solved problem" in the private sector, he said.

"My expectation is the U.S. Digital Service and any vendors they work with will be able to pull this off," he said. "It's the least hard part of this."

Two tech companies that frequently work with the federal government – Microsoft and Accenture – on Tuesday referred questions about the website to the Postal Service. Amazon, a major cloud provider for U.S. agencies, didn't respond to requests for comment.

Howard said the trickiest part of the project is not the website but the physical distribution of kits.

"I don't recall the last time the federal government sent something like this to everyone that wasn't a tax document," he said.

Fishermen protest after eruption causes oil spill in Peru

By FRANKLIN BRICEÑO Associated Press

LIMA, Peru (AP) — An oil spill on the Peruvian coast caused by the waves from an eruption of an undersea volcano in the South Pacific nation of Tonga prompted dozens of fishermen to protest Tuesday

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outside the South American country's main oil refinery.

The men gathered outside the refinery in the province of Callao near Lima's capital. Peru's environment minister, Rubén Ramírez, told reporters that authorities estimate 6,000 barrels of oil were spilled in the area rich in marine biodiversity.

Under the eyes of police, the fishermen carried a large Peruvian flag, fishing nets and signs that read "no to ecological crime," "economically affected families" and "Repsol killer of marine fauna," which referred to the Spain-based company that manages La Pampilla refinery, which processes around 117,000 oil barrels a day, according to its website. They demanded to speak with company representatives, but no executive had approached them.

The company did not immediately return an email from The Associated Press seeking comment.

"There is a massacre of all the hydrobiological biodiversity," said Roberto Espinoza, leader of the local fishermen. "In the midst of a pandemic, having the sea that feeds us, for not having a contingency plan, they have just destroyed a base of biodiversity."

An Italian-flagged ship was loading oil into La Pampilla on Saturday when strong waves moved the boat and caused the spill. Repsol in a statement Sunday said the spill occurred "due to the violence of the waves."

The eruption caused waves that crossed the Pacific. In Peru, two people drowned off a beach and there were reports of minor damage from New Zealand to Santa Cruz, California.

On Tuesday, northwest of the facility, on Cavero beach, the waves covered the sand with a shiny black liquid, along with small dead crustaceans. Fifty workers from companies that work for Repsol inside the refinery removed the oil-stained sand with shovels and piled it up on a small promontory.

Juan Carlos Riveros, biologist and scientific director in Peru of Oceana – an organization dedicated to protecting the world's oceans – said that the species most affected by the spill include guano birds, seagulls, terns, tendrils, sea lions and dolphins.

"The spill also affects the main source of work for artisanal fishermen, since access to their traditional fishing areas is restricted or the target species become contaminated or die," Riveros said. "In the short term, mistrust is generated about the quality and the consumption of fishing is discouraged, with which prices fall and income is reduced."

Peru's environmental assessment and enforcement agency estimates that some 18,000 square meters of beach on Peru's Pacific coast have been affected by the spill.

In a statement, the Peruvian agency said Repsol "has not adopted immediate measures in order to prevent cumulative or more serious damage that affects the soil, water, flora, fauna and hydrobiological resources." An AP reporter on Monday observed workers dressed in white suits collecting the spilled oil with plastic bottles cut in half.

José Llacuchaqui, another local fisherman leader, who was watching the cleanup, said the workers were only collecting the oil that reached the sand, but not the crude that was in the seawater.

"That is preying, killing, all the eggs, all the marine species," he said.

AT&T, Verizon pause some new 5G after airlines raise alarm

By DAVID KOENIG AP Airlines Writer

AT&T and Verizon will delay launching new wireless service near key airports after the nation's largest airlines said the service would interfere with aircraft technology and cause widespread flight disruptions.

The decision from the companies came Tuesday as the Biden administration intervened to broker a settlement between the telecoms and airlines over a rollout of new 5G service.

The companies said they will launch 5G or fifth-generation service Wednesday, but they will delay turning on 5G cell towers within a 2-mile radius of runways designated by federal officials. They did not say how long they would keep those towers idle.

President Joe Biden said the decision by AT&T and Verizon "will avoid potentially devastating disruptions to passenger travel, cargo operations, and our economic recovery, while allowing more than 90%

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of wireless tower deployment to occur as scheduled." He said the administration will keep working on a permanent solution.

Even with the concession by the telecommunications companies, federal officials said there could be some cancellations and delays because of limitations of equipment on certain planes. Delta Air Lines also said there could be issues with flights operating in bad weather because of airport restrictions that regulators issued last week, when the 5G rollout appeared to be on schedule.

The new high-speed wireless service uses a segment of the radio spectrum that is close to that used by altimeters, which are devices that measure the height of aircraft above the ground. Altimeters are used to help pilots land when visibility is poor, and they link to other systems on planes.

AT&T and Verizon say their equipment will not interfere with aircraft electronics, and that the technology is being safely used in 40 other countries.

However, the CEOs of 10 passenger and cargo airlines including American, Delta, United and Southwest say that 5G will be more disruptive than earlier thought. That is because dozens of large airports were subject to flight restrictions announced last week by the Federal Aviation Administration if 5G service was deployed nearby. The CEOs added that those restrictions wouldn't be limited to times when visibility is poor.

"Unless our major hubs are cleared to fly, the vast majority of the traveling and shipping public will essentially be grounded. This means that on a day like yesterday, more than 1,100 flights and 100,000 passengers would be subjected to cancellations, diversions or delays," the CEOs said in a letter Monday to federal officials. "To be blunt, the nation's commerce will grind to a halt."

The showdown between the airline and telecom industries and their rival regulators — the FAA and the Federal Communications Commission, which oversees radio spectrum — threatened to further disrupt the aviation industry, which has been hammered by the pandemic for nearly two years.

This was a crisis that was years in the making.

The airlines and the FAA say that they have tried to raise alarms about potential interference from 5G C-Band but the FCC ignored them.

The telecoms, the FCC and their supporters argue that C-Band and aircraft altimeters operate far enough apart on the radio spectrum to avoid interference. They also say that the aviation industry has known about C-Band technology for several years but did nothing to prepare — airlines chose not to upgrade altimeters that might be subject to interference, and the FAA failed to begin surveying equipment on planes until the last few weeks.

Randall Berry, a professor of electrical and computer engineering at Northwestern University, likened the interference issue to two stations that overlap on the radio dial. The FCC-determined separation "may be enough for some (altimeters) but not for others," he said.

One solution could be outfitting all altimeters with good filters against interference, Berry said, although there could be a fight over who pays for that work — airlines or telecom companies.

After rival T-Mobile got what is called mid-band spectrum from its acquisition of Sprint, AT&T and Verizon spent tens of billions of dollars for C-Band spectrum in a government auction run by the FCC to shore up their own mid-band needs, then spent billions more to build out new networks that they planned to launch in early December.

In response to concern by the airlines, however, they initially agreed to delay the service until early January.

Late on New Year's Eve, Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg and FAA Administrator Stephen Dickson asked the companies for another delay, warning of "unacceptable disruption" to air service.

AT&T CEO John Stankey and Verizon CEO Hans Vestberg rejected the request in a letter that had a scolding, even mocking tone. But they had second thoughts after intervention that reached the White House. The CEOs agreed to the second, shorter delay but implied that there would be no more compromises.

In that deal, the telecoms agreed to reduce the power of their networks near 50 airports for six months, similar to wireless restrictions in France. In exchange, the FAA and the Transportation Department promised not to further oppose the rollout of 5G C-Band.

Biden praised that deal too, but the airlines weren't satisfied with the agreement, regarding it as a vic-

tory for the telecoms that didn't adequately address their concerns.

Microsoft buys game maker Activision Blizzard for about \$70B

By MATT O'BRIEN AP Technology Writer

Microsoft is paying the enormous sum of nearly \$70 billion for Activision Blizzard, the maker of Candy Crush and Call of Duty, a deal that would immediately make it a larger video-game company than Nintendo while raising questions about the deal's possible anti-competitive effects.

The all-cash \$68.7 billion deal will turn Microsoft, maker of the Xbox gaming system, into one of the world's largest video game companies. It will also help it compete with tech rivals such as Meta, formerly Facebook, in creating immersive virtual worlds for both work and play.

If the deal survives scrutiny from U.S. and European regulators in the coming months, it could be one of the biggest tech acquisitions in history. Dell bought data-storage company EMC in 2016 for around \$60 billion.

Activision has been buffeted for months by allegations of misconduct and unequal pay. Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella addressed the issue Tuesday in a conference call with investors.

"The culture of our organization is my No. 1 priority," Nadella said, adding that "it's critical for Activision Blizzard to drive forward" on its commitments to improve its workplace culture.

Activision disclosed last year it was being investigated by the Securities and Exchange Commission over complaints of workplace discrimination and in September settled claims brought by U.S. workforce discrimination regulators. California's civil rights agency sued the Santa Monica-based company in July, citing a "frat boy" culture that had become a "breeding ground for harassment and discrimination against women."

Wall Street saw the acquisition as a big win for Activision Blizzard Inc. and its shares soared 25% in trading Tuesday, making up for losses over the past six months since California's discrimination lawsuit was filed. Shares of Microsoft slipped about 2%.

Last year, Microsoft spent \$7.5 billion to acquire ZeniMax Media, the parent company of video game publisher Bethesda Softworks, which is behind popular video games The Elder Scrolls, Doom and Fallout. Microsoft's properties also include the hit game Minecraft after it bought Swedish game studio Mojang for \$2.5 billion in 2014.

The Redmond, Washington, tech giant said the latest acquisitions will help beef up its Xbox Game Pass game subscription service while also accelerating its ambitions for the metaverse, a collection of virtual worlds envisioned as a next generation of the internet. While Xbox already has its own game-making studio, the prospect of Microsoft controlling so much game content raised questions about whether the company could restrict Activision games from competing consoles, although Nadella promised the deal would help people play games "wherever, whenever and however they want."

The acquisition would push Microsoft past Nintendo as the third-largest video game company by global revenue, behind Playstation-maker Sony and Chinese tech giant Tencent, according to Wedbush Securities analyst Daniel Ives.

"Microsoft needed to do an aggressive deal given their streaming ambitions and metaverse strategy," Ives said. "They're the only game in town that can do a deal of this size with the other tech stalwarts under massive tech scrutiny."

Meta, Google, Amazon and Apple have all attracted increasing attention from antitrust regulators in the U.S. and Europe, but the Activision deal is so big that it will also likely put Microsoft into the regulatory spotlight, Ives said. Microsoft is already facing delays in its planned \$16 billion acquisition of Massachusetts speech recognition company Nuance because of an investigation by British antitrust regulators.

Microsoft is able to make such a big all-cash purchase of Activision because of its success as a cloud computing provider. But after years of focusing on shoring up its business clients and products such as the Office suite of email and other work tools, Ives said Microsoft's failed 2020 attempt to acquire social media platform TikTok may have "really whet the appetite for Nadella to do a big consumer acquisition."

Pushback against the deal was immediate from consumer advocacy groups.

"No way should the Federal Trade Commission and the U.S. Department of Justice permit this merger to proceed," said a statement from Alex Harman, competition policy advocate for Public Citizen. "If Microsoft wants to bet on the 'metaverse,' it should invest in new technology, not swallow up a competitor."

White House press secretary Jen Psaki had no comment on Microsoft's announcement at her briefing Tuesday, but emphasized the Biden administration's recent moves to strengthen enforcement against illegal and anticompetitive mergers.

Started in 1979 by former Atari Inc. employees, Activision has created or acquired many of the most popular video games, from Pitfall in the 1980s to Guitar Hero and the World of Warcraft franchise. Bobby Kotick, 59, has been CEO since 1991.

Microsoft said it expects the deal to close in its 2023 fiscal year, which starts in July. It said Kotick will continue to serve as CEO. After the deal closes, the Activision business unit would then report to Phil Spencer, who has led Microsoft's Xbox division and will now serve as CEO of Microsoft Gaming.

Kotick survived a number of executive shakeups at Activision last year after a series of controversies stemming from allegations of a toxic workplace culture. A shareholder lawsuit in August said the company failed to disclose to investors that it was being investigated in California and that it had workplace culture issues that could result in legal problems.

Activision reached a deal in September with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to settle claims that followed a nearly three-year investigation. The agency said Activision failed to take effective action after employees complained about sexual harassment, discriminated against pregnant employees and retaliated against employees who spoke out, including by firing them.

Microsoft has also been investigating its own practices toward sexual harassment and gender discrimination, opening an inquiry last week sought by investors at its annual shareholders meeting in November. The company committed to publishing a report later this year on how it handles harassment claims, including past allegations involving senior leaders such as co-founder Bill Gates.

Russia moves more troops westward amid Ukraine tensions

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russia is sending an unspecified number of troops from the country's far east to Belarus for major war games, officials said Tuesday, a deployment that will further beef up Russian military presence near Ukraine amid Western fears of a planned invasion.

Amid the soaring tensions, the White House warned that Russia could attack its neighbor at "any point," while the U.K. delivered a batch of anti-tank weapons to Ukraine.

Russia's Deputy Defense Minister Alexander Fomin said the joint drills with Belarus would involve practicing a joint response to external threats.

Ukrainian officials have warned that Russia could launch an attack on Ukraine from several directions, including from its ally Belarus.

The U.S. again stressed its concern Tuesday, with White House press secretary Jen Psaki describing the Russian forces' move into Belarus as part of an "extremely dangerous situation."

"We're now at a stage where Russia could at any point launch an attack in Ukraine," she said.

A series of talks last week between Russia, the U.S. and NATO failed to quell the tensions over Ukraine. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken will meet his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov in Geneva on Friday in another attempt to defuse the crisis.

Ukraine's Defense Ministry said Tuesday it has received a shipment of anti-tank weapons from the U.K., noting that they will help "strengthen our defense capability."

Russia already has started moving troops for the war games in Belarus. Fomin said it would take through Feb. 9 to fully deploy weapons and personnel for the Allied Resolve 2022 drills, which are expected to take place Feb. 10-20.

Fomin didn't say how many troops will be involved, but mentioned that Russia will deploy a dozen Su-35 fighter jets and several air defense units to Belarus. The deployment would bolster an estimated 100,000

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Russian troops with tanks and other heavy weapons who are already amassed near Ukraine.

Russia has denied that it intends to attack its neighbor but demanded guarantees from the West that NATO will not expand to Ukraine or other former Soviet nations or place its troops and weapons there. Washington and its allies firmly rejected Moscow's demands during Russia-U.S. negotiations in Geneva and a related NATO-Russia meeting in Brussels last week.

Fomin said the drills in Belarus, which involve an unspecified number of troops from Russia's Eastern Military District, reflect the need to practice concentrating the country's entire military potential in the west.

"A situation may arise when forces and means of the regional group of forces will be insufficient to ensure reliable security of the union state, and we must be ready to strengthen it," Fomin said at a meeting with foreign military attaches. "We have reached an understanding with Belarus that it's necessary to engage the entire military potential for joint defense."

Belarus' authoritarian president, Alexander Lukashenko, said the joint maneuvers will be conducted on Belarus' western border and in the country's south, where it borders Ukraine. Lukashenko, who has edged increasingly close to Russia amid Western sanctions over his government's crackdown on domestic protests, has recently offered to host Russian nuclear weapons.

A senior Biden administration official said the Russian troop deployment to Belarus raises concerns that Moscow may be planning to stage troops there to stretch Ukraine's defenses with an attack from the north. The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive issues, noted that the movement may also indicate Belarus' willingness "to allow both Russian conventional and nuclear forces to be stationed on its territory."

Amid the tensions, Ukraine's Defense Ministry said Tuesday that it was speeding up efforts to form reserve battalions that would allow for the rapid deployment of 130,000 recruits to expand the country's 246,000-strong military.

The United States and its allies have urged Russia to deescalate the situation by calling back the troops amassed near Ukraine.

"In recent weeks, more than 100,000 Russian troops with tanks and guns have gathered near Ukraine without an understandable reason, and it's hard not to understand that as a threat," German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock told reporters Tuesday after talks in Moscow with her Russian counterpart, Lavrov.

Lavrov responded by restating Moscow's argument that it's free to deploy its forces wherever it considers it necessary on its territory.

"We can't accept demands about our armed forces on our own territory," Lavrov said. "We aren't threatening anyone, but we are hearing threats to us."

Baerbock emphasized that the West was ready "for a serious dialogue on mutual agreements and steps to bring everyone in Europe more security."

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg met with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in Berlin on Tuesday. He said "the main task now is to make progress on the political way forward" to prevent a military attack against Ukraine.

"NATO allies are ready to meet with Russia again, and today I have invited Russia and all the NATO allies to attend a series of meetings in the NATO-Russia Council in the near future to address our concerns but also listen to Russia's concerns," Stoltenberg said.

He added that NATO "in the near future" will deliver its written proposals in response to Russian demands and "hopefully we can begin meeting after that."

"We need to see what Russia says, and that will be a kind of pivotal moment," the NATO chief said.

Lavrov, meanwhile, reaffirmed that Russia wants a quick Western answer to its demand for security guarantees that would preclude NATO's expansion to Ukraine and limit its presence in Eastern Europe. He repeated that in a phone conversation with Blinken, who will visit Ukraine on Wednesday and meet with Lavrov on Friday.

Speaking on a visit Tuesday to Ukraine, Canadian Foreign Minister Mélanie Joly denounced the Russian

troop buildup as unacceptable. She noted Canada's efforts to help train Ukraine's military, adding that it's currently considering Ukraine's demand to provide it with military equipment and will make "a decision in a timely manner."

Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine in 2014 after the ouster of Ukraine's Moscow-friendly leader and also threw its weight behind a separatist insurgency that took over large sections in eastern Ukraine. More than 14,000 people have been killed in nearly eight years of fighting there.

NTSB chief to fed agency: Stop using misleading statistics

By HOPE YEN and TOM KRISHER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — With traffic fatalities spiking higher, the nation's top safety investigator says a widely cited government statistic that 94% of serious crashes are solely due to driver error is misleading and that the Transportation Department should stop using it.

Jennifer Homendy, the chair of the National Transportation Safety Board, told The Associated Press on Tuesday that she's surprised the wording remains on the department's website even as the Biden administration pledges to embark on a broader strategy to stave off crashes through better road design, auto safety features and other measures.

Auto safety advocates have been calling on the department for years to stop using the statistic, including requests by Homendy in recent months as well as a letter from auto safety groups to Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg last month. They call the figure an unacceptable "excuse" for surging crashes. In a section touting the safety potential of automated vehicles, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's website states "94% of serious crashes are due to human error."

"That has to change," Homendy said of NHTSA's continuing use of the statistic. "It's dangerous."

She said the public should be enraged that nearly 40,000 people are dying annually in traffic accidents and millions are injured, but rather sees it as "just a risk people take."

"What's happening is we have a culture that accepts it," she said.

"At the same time it relieves everybody else of responsibility they have for improving safety, including DOT," she added, referring to the Department of Transportation. "You can't simultaneously say we're focused on a 'safe system' approach — making sure everybody who shares responsibility for road safety is taking action to eliminate fatalities and serious injuries ... — and have a 94% number out there, which is not accurate."

Responding, NHTSA said Tuesday it would update the wording on its website in the near future "to address that characterization of the data as well as provide additional information." The department is slated to release next week a national strategy for steps to save lives on the roads.

The figure stems from a NHTSA memo put out in 2015 stating that "the critical reason, which is the last event in the crash causal chain, was assigned to the driver in 94% of the crashes." However, the memo also included a caveat that a "critical reason" is "not intended to be interpreted as the cause of the crash" and pointed to other significant factors.

State transportation agencies and the department, then led by Secretary Elaine Chao, subsequently cast the memo as finding that 94% of serious crashes happened "due to human error," often when promoting the development of automated vehicles.

Traffic fatalities have surged in recent years, particularly during the coronavirus pandemic. The number of U.S. traffic deaths in the first six months of 2021 hit 20,160, the highest first-half total since 2006. The number was 18.4% higher than the first half of 2020, prompting the administration to embark on a broader strategy.

Traffic deaths began to spike in 2019, and NHTSA blamed speeding and other reckless driving behavior for the increases. Before then, the number of fatalities had fallen for three straight years.

On Tuesday, Homendy echoed other safety groups in saying continued use of the figure, particularly by NHTSA itself, distracts from a comprehensive approach that is now needed. In their letter to Buttigieg last month, groups including Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety, the Consumer Federation of America

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and Center for Auto Safety stressed the need for a multifaceted plan to reduce crashes, including issuing long overdue safety standards mandated by Congress and more closely overseeing the deployment of autonomous vehicles on the road.

The continued use of the 94% data point, they wrote, "ignores the complexities of crashes and undermines efforts to implement the Safe System Approach which examines how all aspects of the transportation environment contribute to crashes."

In a separate roadmap for safety released Tuesday, Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety pointed to rising crashes among AVs and cited them as one of the greater threats on the road due to insufficient safety.

The administration has expressed a greater commitment to improving safety for all road users. President Joe Biden's \$1 trillion infrastructure law, for instance, broadly promotes a "safe system" approach urged by NTSB that is aimed at minimizing the impact of human mistakes and protecting people who walk and bike as well as drive.

Under the law, about \$5 billion will go for the administration's new Safe Streets and Roads for All program, which provides grants to cities, metro areas and towns to improve safety, especially for cyclists and pedestrians. It also includes new federal mandates to automakers to install anti-drunken driving technology in cars.

Homendy said she is "cautiously optimistic" that the department is taking the necessary steps to boost safety, including improving data collection to determine when and why accidents are happening. But she said what worries her most is the government's ability to keep pace in making the best use of rapidly changing technology to keep people safe.

"I'm very direct on when I think there's a safety concern and where people are dying," she said. "And you know it is a duty and I take this very seriously. ... Whether it's DOT or NTSB, we have to work as hard as we can."

US plans \$50B wildfire fight where forests meet civilization

By MATTHEW BROWN and JONATHAN J. COOPER Associated Press

BILLINGS, Mont. (AP) — The Biden administration said Tuesday it will significantly expand efforts to stave off catastrophic wildfires that have torched areas of the U.S. West by more aggressively thinning forests around "hot spots" where nature and neighborhoods collide.

As climate change heats up and dries out the West, administration officials said they have crafted a \$50 billion plan to more than double the use of controlled fires and logging to reduce trees and other vegetation that serves as tinder in the most at-risk areas. Only some of the work has funding so far.

Projects will begin this year, and the plan will focus on regions where out-of-control blazes have wiped out neighborhoods and sometimes entire communities — including California's Sierra Nevada mountains, the east side of the Rocky Mountains in Colorado, and portions of Arizona, Oregon and Washington state. Homes keep getting built in fire-prone areas, even as conditions that stoke blazes get worse.

"You're going to have forest fires. The question is how catastrophic do those fires have to be," Agriculture Sec. Tom Vilsack told the Associated Press in an interview. "The time to act is now if we want to ultimately over time change the trajectory of these fires."

Specific projects weren't immediately released, and it's not clear who would pay for the full scope of work envisioned across almost 80,000 square miles (200,000 square kilometers) — an area almost as large as Idaho. Much of that area is controlled by states, tribes or is privately owned.

Reaching that goal would require an estimated \$20 billion over 10 years for work on national forests and \$30 billion for work on other federal, state, tribal and private lands, said Vilsack spokesperson Kate Waters.

Vilsack acknowledged that the new effort will also require a "paradigm shift" within the U.S. Forest Service, from an agency devoted to stamping out fires, into one that uses what some Native Americans call "good fire" on forests and rangeland to prevent even larger blazes.

Forest Service planning documents indicate the work will focus on "hotspots" that make up only 10% of

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the fire-prone areas across the U.S. but account for 80% of risk to communities because of their population densities and locations.

The recently-passed federal infrastructure bill put a down payment on the initiative — about \$3 billion over five years that Vilsack said will get work going quickly.

Wildfire expert John Abatzoglou said lessening fire dangers on the amount of land envisioned under the administration's plan is a "lofty goal" that represents even more acreage than burned over the past 10 years across the West. But Abatzoglou, a University of California Merced engineering professor, said the focus on wildfire hazards closest to communities makes sense.

"Our scorecard for fire should be about lives saved rather than acres that didn't burn," he said.

Vilsack joined Forest Service Chief Randy Moore to announce the plan during an event in Phoenix where he defended its scope as realistic.

"We know from a scientific standpoint precisely where this action has to take place in many of these forests in order to protect communities, in order to protect people," Vilsack said following the announcement at the Desert Botanical Garden, a popular showcase for cactuses, desert trees and other dry-weather plants.

Dealing with western wildfires is becoming increasingly urgent as they get more destructive and intense. There have been rare winter blazes in recent weeks, including infernos in Montana and Colorado, where a wildfire on Dec. 30 tore through a suburban area and destroyed more than 1,000 buildings, leaving one person dead and a second still missing.

And there's no signs of a let-up in conditions that keep the risk of wildfires extremely high. A long-term "megadrought" is gripping the region and scientists forecast temperatures will keep rising as more climate-changing carbon emissions are pumped into the atmosphere.

The impact stretches far beyond the western U.S. because massive smoke plumes at the height of wildfire season in the U.S. and Canada spread the health effects across North America — sending unhealthy pollution last summer to major cities from San Francisco to Philadelphia and Toronto.

For decades the primary approach to containing and extinguishing forest fires was to try to stamp them out. The efforts have been similar to massive, military-like campaigns, including planes, fleets of heavy equipment and thousands of firefighting personnel and support workers dispatched to the fire zones.

However, fires are a part of the natural cycle for most forests, so putting them out leaves stands of trees that don't burn surrounded by dead wood, underbrush and other highly flammable fuels — a worst-case scenario when blazes ignite.

Critics say the government's plan to use logging to reduce fire damages will hurt both forests and the wildlife and water supplies that depend on them. In South Dakota's Black Hills, for example, government biologists have said that too many trees dying from a combination of insects, fire and logging have made current timber harvest levels unsustainable.

"The U.S. Forest Service simply cannot log its way out of the climate crisis," said Adam Rissien with the environmental group WildEarth Guardians.

But Vilsack said a combination of tree thinning and intentionally set fires to clear undergrowth that are called prescribed burns will make the forests healthier in the long run while reducing the threat to public safety.

Forests thinned near Lake Tahoe and its tourism gateway community of South Lake Tahoe were credited with slowing the advance of the massive Caldor Fire last summer that destroyed almost 800 homes and prompted evacuations of tens of thousands of residents and tourists.

A similar phenomenon played out during Oregon's Bootleg fire last July, which burned more than 600 square miles (1,500 square kilometers) but did less damage in forest that was thinned over the past decade.

"We know this works," Vilsack said. "It's removing some of the timber, in a very scientific and thoughtful way, so that at the end of the day fires don't continue to hop from tree top to tree top, but eventually come to ground where we can put them out."

Majority of US states pursue nuclear power for emission cuts

By JENNIFER McDERMOTT Associated Press

PROVIDENCE, R.I. (AP) — As climate change pushes states in the U.S. to dramatically cut their use of fossil fuels, many are coming to the conclusion that solar, wind and other renewable power sources might not be enough to keep the lights on.

Nuclear power is emerging as an answer to fill the gap as states transition away from coal, oil and natural gas to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and stave off the worst effects of a warming planet. The renewed interest in nuclear comes as companies, including one started by Microsoft founder Bill Gates, are developing smaller, cheaper reactors that could supplement the power grid in communities across the U.S.

Nuclear power comes with its own set of potential problems, especially radioactive waste that can remain dangerous for thousands of years. But supporters say the risks can be minimized and that the energy source will be essential to stabilize power supplies as the world tries to move away from carbon dioxide-emitting fossil fuels.

Tennessee Valley Authority President and CEO Jeff Lyash puts it simply: You can't significantly reduce carbon emissions without nuclear power.

"At this point in time, I don't see a path that gets us there without preserving the existing fleet and building new nuclear," Lyash said. "And that's after having maximized the amount of solar we can build in the system."

The TVA is a federally owned utility that provides electricity to seven states as the nation's third largest electricity generator. It's adding about 10,000 megawatts of solar capacity by 2035 — enough to power nearly 1 million homes annually — but also operates three nuclear plants and plans to test a small reactor in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. By 2050, it hopes to hit its goal of becoming net zero, which means the amount of greenhouse gases produced is no more than the amount removed from the atmosphere.

An Associated Press survey of the energy policies in all 50 states and the District of Columbia found that a strong majority— about two-thirds— say nuclear, in one fashion or another, will help take the place of fossil fuels. The momentum building behind nuclear power could lead to the first expansion of nuclear reactor construction in the U.S. in more than three decades.

Roughly one-third of the states and the District of Columbia responded to the AP's survey by saying they have no plans to incorporate nuclear power in their green energy goals, instead leaning heavily on renewables. Energy officials in those states said their goals are achievable because of advances in energy storage using batteries, investments in the grid for high-voltage interstate transmission, energy efficiency efforts to reduce demand and power provided by hydroelectric dams.

The split over nuclear power in U.S. states mirrors a similar debate unfolding in Europe, where countries including Germany are phasing out their reactors while others, such as France, are sticking with the technology or planning to build more plants.

The Biden administration, which has tried to take aggressive steps to reduce greenhouse gases, views nuclear as necessary to help compensate for the decline of carbon-based fuels in the nation's energy grid.

U.S. Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm told the AP that the administration wants to get to zero-carbon electricity, and "that means nuclear, that means hydropower, that means geothermal, that means obviously wind on and offshore, that means solar."

"We want it all," Granholm said during a visit in December to Providence, Rhode Island, to promote an offshore wind project.

The \$1 trillion infrastructure package championed by Biden and signed into law last year will allocate about \$2.5 billion for advanced reactor demonstration projects. The Energy Department said studies by Princeton University and the Decarb America Research Initiative show that nuclear is necessary for a carbon-free future.

Granholm also touted new technologies involving hydrogen and capturing and storing carbon dioxide before it is released into the atmosphere.

Nuclear reactors have operated reliably and carbon-free for many decades, and the current climate change conversation brings the benefits of nuclear to the forefront, said Maria Korsnick, president and

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chief executive officer of the Nuclear Energy Institute, the industry's trade association.

"The scale of this electric grid that's across the United States, it needs something that's always there, something that can help really be the backbone, if you will, for this grid," she said. "That's why it's a partnership with wind and solar and nuclear."

Nuclear technology still comes with significant risks that other low-carbon energy sources don't, said Edwin Lyman, director of nuclear power safety at the Union of Concerned Scientists. While the new, smaller reactors might cost less than traditional reactors to build, they'll also produce more expensive electricity, he said. He's also concerned the industry might cut corners on safety and security to save money and compete in the market. The group does not oppose the use of nuclear power, but wants to make sure it's safe.

"I'm not optimistic we'd see the kind of safety and security requirements in place that would make me feel comfortable with the adoption or deployment of these so-called small modular reactors around the country," Lyman said.

The U.S. also has no long-term plan for managing or disposing the hazardous waste that can persist in the environment for hundreds of thousands of years, and there's the danger of accidents or targeted attacks for both the waste and the reactors, Lyman said. Nuclear disasters at Pennsylvania's Three Mile Island, Chernobyl and more recently, Fukushima, Japan, in 2011 provide an enduring warning about the dangers.

Nuclear power already provides about 20% of electricity in the U.S., accounting for about half the nation's carbon-free energy. Most of the 93 reactors operating in the country are east of the Mississippi River.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission has approved just one of the new, small modular reactor designs — from a company called NuScale Power, in August 2020. Three other companies have told the commission they're planning to apply for their designs. All of these use water to cool the core.

The NRC is expecting about a half dozen designs to be submitted for advanced reactors, which use something other than water to cool the core, such as gas, liquid metal or molten salt. That includes a project by Gates' company, TerraPower, in Wyoming, the nation's largest coal-producing state. It has long depended on coal for power and jobs, and ships coal to more than half the states.

As utilities quit coal, Wyoming is tapping into wind and installed the third-largest amount of wind power generating capacity of any state in 2020, after Texas and Iowa. But Glen Murrell, executive director of the Wyoming Energy Authority, said it's unrealistic to expect all the nation's energy to be provided exclusively through wind and solar. Renewable energy should work in tandem with other technologies such as nuclear and hydrogen, he said.

TerraPower plans to build its advanced reactor demonstration plant in Kemmerer, a town of 2,700 in western Wyoming where a coal plant is closing. The reactor uses Sodium technology, which is a sodium-cooled fast reactor paired with an energy-storage system.

In another coal-dependent state, West Virginia, some lawmakers are trying to repeal the state's moratorium on the construction of new nuclear facilities.

A second reactor design by TerraPower will be built at the Idaho National Laboratory. The Molten Chloride Reactor Experiment will have a core that's as small as a refrigerator and molten salt to cool it instead of water.

Among the other states that support nuclear power, Georgia maintains that its nuclear reactor expansion will "provide Georgia with ample clean energy" for 60 to 80 years. Georgia has the only nuclear project under construction in the U.S. — the expansion of Plant Vogtle from two of the traditional large reactors to four. The total cost is now more than double the original projection of \$14 billion, and the project is years behind schedule.

New Hampshire said that without nuclear, the region's environmental goals would be impossible to meet as affordably. And the Alaska Energy Authority has been working since 2007 to plan for the use of small modular nuclear reactors, possibly at remote mine sites and military bases first.

The Maryland Energy Administration said that while the goal of all renewable energy is laudable and costs are declining, "for the foreseeable future we need a variety of fuels," including nuclear and cleaner

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natural gas-powered systems to ensure reliability and resiliency. Maryland has one nuclear plant, and the energy administration is talking with manufacturers of small modular reactors.

Other officials, mostly in Democratic-led states, said they're moving beyond nuclear power. Some said they never relied heavily on it to begin with and don't see a need for it in the future.

They said the cost of new reactors compared to installing wind turbines or solar panels, the safety concerns and the unresolved question of how to store hazardous nuclear waste are deal-breakers. Some environmentalists also oppose small modular reactors because of the safety concerns and hazardous waste questions. The Sierra Club has described them as "high-risk, high-cost and highly questionable."

In New York, which has some of the nation's most ambitious goals to combat climate change, the future energy grid will be dominated by wind, solar and hydropower, said New York State Energy Research and Development Authority President and CEO Doreen Harris.

Harris said she sees a future beyond nuclear, dropping from nearly 30% of the state's energy mix currently to around 5%, but the state will need advanced, long-duration battery storage and perhaps cleaner-burning fuels such as hydrogen.

Nevada is especially sensitive to nuclear energy because of the failed plan to store the nation's commercial spent nuclear fuel at Yucca Mountain. Officials there don't consider nuclear power a viable option. Instead, they see potential for battery technology for energy storage and geothermal energy.

"Nevada understands better than most other states that nuclear technology has significant lifecycle problems," David Bobzien, director of the Nevada Governor's Office of Energy, said in a statement. "A focus on short-term gains can't alleviate the long-term issues with nuclear energy."

California is slated to close its last remaining nuclear power plant, Diablo Canyon, in 2025, as it turns to cheaper renewables to power its grid by 2045.

Officials think they can meet that goal if California sustains its expansion of clean electricity generation at a "record-breaking rate for the next 25 years," building on average of 6 gigawatts of new solar, wind and battery storage sources annually, according to state planning documents. California also imports power produced in other states as part of a Western U.S. grid system.

Skeptics have questioned whether California's all-in renewable plan can work in a state of nearly 40 million people.

Research from scientists at Stanford University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology concluded that delaying Diablo Canyon's retirement to 2035 would save California \$2.6 billion in power system costs, reduce the chances of brownouts and lower carbon emissions. When the research was presented in November, former U.S. Energy Secretary Steven Chu said the nation is not positioned in the near-term to go to 100% renewable energy.

"They'll be times when the wind doesn't blow and the sun doesn't shine," he said. "And we will need some power that we can actually turn on and dispatch at will. That leaves two choices: either fossil fuel or nuclear."

But the California Public Utilities Commission says it would likely take "seismic upgrades" and changes to the cooling systems, which could cost more than \$1 billion, to continue operations at Diablo Canyon beyond 2025. Commission spokesperson Terrie Prosper said 11,500 megawatts of new clean energy resources will be online by 2026 to meet the state's long-term needs.

Jason Bordoff, co-founding dean of the Columbia Climate School, said that while California's plans are "technically possible," he's skeptical because it's challenging to build that much renewable capacity quickly. Bordoff said there is "good reason" to think about extending the life of Diablo Canyon to keep energy costs down and reduce emissions as quickly as possible.

"We have to incorporate nuclear energy in a way that acknowledges it's not risk-free," he said. "But the risks of falling short of our climate goals exceed the risks of including nuclear energy as part of the zero carbon energy mix."

The AP Interview: Exiled artist Ai Weiwei on Beijing Games

By STEPHEN WADE AP Sports Writer

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When he was tapped to help design Beijing's Bird's Nest Stadium for the 2008 Summer Olympics, the artist Ai Weiwei hoped the Games and the arena's instantly recognizable weave of curving steel beams would symbolize China's new openness.

He was disappointed. The Chinese dissident widely regarded as one of the world's greatest living artists has repeatedly described the stadium and the 2008 Olympics as a "fake smile" that his native country presented to the world.

Now the Bird's Nest is about to host the Feb. 4 opening ceremony for the Winter Olympics, and Ai expects more of the same.

"As an architect, my goal was the same as other architects, that is, to design it as perfectly as possible," Ai told The Associated Press in an interview over email. "The way it was used afterwards went in the opposite direction from our ideals. We had hoped that our architecture could be a symbol of freedom and openness and represent optimism and a positive force, which was very different from how it was used as a promotional tool in the end."

Even before his fame landed him the design job working with a Swiss architectural firm, Ai had been an unrelenting critic of the Chinese Communist Party. He was jailed in 2011 in China for unspecified crimes and now lives in exile in Portugal. He has also lived in exile in Germany — he still maintains a studio there — and in Britain.

His art — which also includes sculpture, photography, video and the written word — is almost always provocative, and he offers scathing commentary on the censorship and lack of civil liberties in his homeland.

He used his dashed hopes for the Bird's Nest to illustrate how China has changed since 2008, a time that the Olympics were seen as a "coming out" party for China.

When the International Olympic Committee awarded Beijing the Olympics in 2001, it said the Games could help improve human rights. But Ai termed the 2008 Olympics a "low point" as migrant workers were forced out of the city, small shops were shuttered and street vendors removed. Blocks-long billboards popped up, painted with palm trees and beach scenes, to hide shabby neighborhoods from view.

"The entire Olympics took place under the situation of a blockade," Ai told AP. "For the general public, there was no joy in participation. Instead, there was a close collaboration between the IOC and the Chinese regime, "who put on a show together in order to obtain economic and political capital."

His memoir "1,000 Years of Joys and Sorrows" was published last year. It details the overlap of his life and career with that of his father, Ai Qing, a famous poet who was sent into internal exile in 1957, the year Ai Weiwei was born.

In the book, Ai writes that he watched the opening ceremony away from the stadium on a television screen, and jotted down the following.

"In this world where everything has a political dimension, we are now told we mustn't politicize things: This is simply a sporting event, detached from history and ideas and values — detached from human nature, even."

The IOC and China again say the Olympics are divorced from politics. China, of course, has political ends in mind. For the IOC, the Olympics are a sports business that generates billions in sponsor and television income.

In his email, Ai described China as emboldened by the 2008 Olympics — "more confident and uncomplaining." He said the 2008 Games were a "negative" that allowed China's government to better shape its message. The Olympics did not change China in ways the IOC suggested, or foster civil liberties.

Instead, China used the Olympics to alter how it was perceived on the world stage and to signal its rising power.

The 2008 Games were followed a month later by the world financial crisis, and in 2012 by the rise of General Secretary Xi Jinping. Xi was a senior politician in charge of the 2008 Olympics, but the 2022 Games are his own.

"Since 2008, the government of China has further strengthened its control, and the human rights situation has further deteriorated," Ai told AP.

"China has seen the West's hypocrisy and inaction when it comes to issues of human rights, so they have

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become even bolder, more unscrupulous and more ruthless. In 2022, China will impose more stringent constraints to the internet and political life," including human rights and the press, he said.

The Communist Party "does not care if the West participates in the Games or not because China is confident that the West is busy enough with their own affairs."

Ai characterized the 2022 Winter Olympics and the pandemic as a case of fortunate timing for China's authoritarian government. The pandemic will limit the movement of journalists during the Games, and it will also showcase the state's Orwellian control.

"China, under the system of state capitalism and especially after COVID, firmly believes that its administrative control is the only effective method; this enhances their belief in authoritarianism. Meanwhile, China thinks that the West, with its ideas of democracy and freedom, can hardly obtain effective control. So, the 2022 Olympics will further testify to the effectiveness of authoritarianism in China and the frustration of the West's democratic regimes."

Ai was repeatedly critical of the IOC as an enabler interested solely in generating income from the Chinese market. The IOC and China both see the Games as a business opportunity. Ai suggested that many Chinese see the Olympics as another political exercise, with some people — like athletes — trying to extract value.

"In China there is only the party's guidance, state-controlled media and people who have been brainwashed by the media," Ai wrote. "There is no real civil society. Under this circumstance, Chinese people are not interested in the Olympics at all because it is simply a display of state politics. Nationally trained athletes exchange Olympic gold medals for economic gains for individuals or even for sport organizations; this way of doing things deviates from the Olympics' original ideas."

Asked if he planned to go back to China, he said he was doubtful. And he dismissed the effectiveness of the West's diplomatic boycott, which means government officials will not attend.

"Judging from the current situation, it is more and more unlikely for me to be able to return to China," he said. "My main point here is that the situation in China has worsened. The West's boycott is futile and pointless. China does not care about it at all."

White House: Texas hostage-taker had raised no red flags

By MICHAEL BALSAMO, JAKE BLEIBERG and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

DALLAS (AP) — The gunman who took four people hostage at a Texas synagogue in a 10-hour standoff that ended in his death was checked against law enforcement databases before entering the U.S. but raised no red flags, the White House said Tuesday.

Malik Faisal Akram, a 44-year-old British citizen, arrived in the U.S. at Kennedy Airport in New York on a tourist visa about two weeks ago, officials said. He spent time in Dallas-area homeless shelters before the attack Saturday in the suburb of Colleyville.

Akram was not believed to be included in the Terrorist Screening Database, a listing of known or suspected terrorists maintained by the FBI and shared with a variety of federal agencies, two law enforcement officials told The Associated Press. Had he been included, it would have been extremely difficult for him to get into the country.

"Our understanding, and obviously we're still looking into this, is that he was checked against U.S. government databases multiple times prior to entering the country, and the U.S. government did not have any derogatory information about the individual in our systems at the time of entry," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said.

She added: "We're certainly looking back ... what occurred to learn every possible lesson we can to prevent attacks like this in the future."

British media, including the Guardian, reported Tuesday that Akram was investigated by the domestic intelligence service MI5 as a possible "terrorist threat" in 2020, but authorities concluded he posed no danger, and the investigation was closed.

Britain's Home Office did not immediately comment on the reports.

The case illustrated once more the difficulties in identifying potential lone-wolf attackers, despite the

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U.S. government's enormous strides in its counterterrorism efforts since 9/11.

The standoff in Colleyville, a city of about 26,000 people 30 miles (48 kilometers) northwest of Dallas, ended after the last of the hostages ran out of the synagogue and an FBI SWAT team rushed in. Akram was killed, though authorities have declined to say who shot him.

President Joe Biden called the episode an act of terror.

Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker, who was among the hostages, told CBS that he had let Akram into Congregation Beth Israel because he appeared to need shelter. The rabbi said the man wasn't threatening or suspicious at first, but later he heard a gun click as he was praying.

One hostage was released hours later, and the rabbi and two others later escaped after Cytron-Walker threw a chair at the gunman.

During the standoff, Akram could be heard on a Facebook livestream demanding the release of Aafia Siddiqui, a Pakistani neuroscientist who is suspected of having ties to al-Qaida and was convicted of trying to kill U.S. troops in Afghanistan. The prison where Siddiqui is serving her sentence is in nearby Fort Worth.

An attorney in Texas who represents Siddiqui said the prisoner had no connection to Akram.

The investigation stretched to England, where over the weekend police announced two teenagers were in custody in connection with the standoff. The teenagers are Akram's sons, two U.S. law enforcement officials told AP. The officials were not authorized to discuss the investigation and spoke on condition of anonymity.

On Tuesday, police in Britain said the teenagers had been released without charge.

Akram is from the English industrial city of Blackburn. His family said he had been "suffering from mental health issues."

Investigators believe he had initially traveled to New York believing that Siddiqui was still being held there — where her trial occurred — without realizing she had been sent to a federal prison in Texas.

During the standoff, Akram forced Cytron-Walker to call Angela Buchdahl, the senior rabbi at New York's Central Synagogue, in a bid to win Siddiqui's release. In at least one subsequent call, Akram ranted and demanded that Buchdahl try to get Siddiqui freed, an official said. Buchdahl called 911 and reported the calls to New York City police.

Investigators are still sorting through Akram's movements in the U.S. and reviewing his financial and phone records, but believe he may have traveled by bus to Texas, two of the officials said.

Authorities believe he bought the handgun used in the hostage-taking in a private sale, according to a person familiar with the matter who spoke on condition of anonymity because the investigation is still going on.

In another major terrorism case, Omar Mateen, who killed 49 people at an Orlando, Florida, nightclub in 2016, had been investigated repeatedly by the FBI but not charged. The Orlando massacre and other attacks prompted the FBI to launch an internal review of how it handled tips and leads in terrorism investigations.

Felony charges are 1st in a fatal crash involving Autopilot

By TOM KRISHER and STEFANIE DAZIO Associated Press

DETROIT (AP) — California prosecutors have filed two counts of vehicular manslaughter against the driver of a Tesla on Autopilot who ran a red light, slammed into another car and killed two people in 2019.

The defendant appears to be the first person to be charged with a felony in the United States for a fatal crash involving a motorist who was using a partially automated driving system. Los Angeles County prosecutors filed the charges in October, but they came to light only last week.

The driver, Kevin George Aziz Riad, 27, has pleaded not guilty. Riad, a limousine service driver, is free on bail while the case is pending.

The misuse of Autopilot, which can control steering, speed and braking, has occurred on numerous occasions and is the subject of investigations by two federal agencies. The filing of charges in the Cali-

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California crash could serve notice to drivers who use systems like Autopilot that they cannot rely on them to control vehicles.

The criminal charges aren't the first involving an automated driving system, but they are the first to involve a widely used driver technology. Authorities in Arizona filed a charge of negligent homicide in 2020 against a driver Uber had hired to take part in the testing of a fully autonomous vehicle on public roads. The Uber vehicle, an SUV with the human backup driver on board, struck and killed a pedestrian.

By contrast, Autopilot and other driver-assist systems are widely used on roads across the world. An estimated 765,000 Tesla vehicles are equipped with it in the United States alone.

In the Tesla crash, police said a Model S was moving at a high speed when it left a freeway and ran a red light in the Los Angeles suburb of Gardena and struck a Honda Civic at an intersection on Dec. 29, 2019. Two people who were in the Civic, Gilberto Alcazar Lopez and Maria Guadalupe Nieves-Lopez died at the scene. Riad and a woman in the Tesla were hospitalized with non-life threatening injuries.

Criminal charging documents do not mention Autopilot. But the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, which sent investigators to the crash, confirmed last week that Autopilot was in use in the Tesla at the time of the crash.

Riad's defense attorney did not respond to requests for comment last week, and the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office declined to discuss the case. Riad's preliminary hearing is scheduled for Feb. 23.

NHTSA and the National Transportation Safety Board have been reviewing the widespread misuse of Autopilot by drivers, whose overconfidence and inattention have been blamed for multiple crashes, including fatal ones. In one crash report, the NTSB referred to its misuse as "automation complacency."

The agency said that in a 2018 crash in Culver City, California, in which a Tesla hit a firetruck, the design of the Autopilot system had "permitted the driver to disengage from the driving task." No one was hurt in that crash.

Last May, a California man was arrested after officers noticed his Tesla moving down a freeway with the man in the back seat and no one behind the steering wheel.

Teslas that have had Autopilot in use also have hit a highway barrier or tractor-trailers that were crossing roads. NHTSA has sent investigation teams to 26 crashes involving Autopilot since 2016, involving at least 11 deaths.

Messages have been left seeking comment from Tesla, which has disbanded its media relations department. Since the Autopilot crashes began, Tesla has updated the software to try to make it harder for drivers to abuse it. It's also tried to improve Autopilot's ability to detect emergency vehicles.

The company has said that Autopilot and a more sophisticated "Full Self-Driving" system cannot drive themselves and that drivers must pay attention and be ready to react at anytime. "Full Self-Driving" is being tested by hundreds of Tesla owners on public roads in the U.S.

Bryant Walker Smith, a law professor at the University of South Carolina who studies automated vehicles, said this is the first U.S. case to his knowledge in which serious criminal charges were filed in a fatal crash involving a partially automated driver-assist system. Tesla, he said, could be "criminally, civilly or morally culpable" if it is found to have put a dangerous technology on the road.

Donald Slavik, a Colorado lawyer who has served as a consultant in automotive technology lawsuits, including many against Tesla, said he, too, is unaware of any previous felony charges being filed against a U.S. driver who was using partially automated driver technology involved in a fatal crash.

The families of Lopez and Nieves-Lopez have sued Tesla and Riad in separate lawsuits. They have alleged negligence by Riad and have accused Tesla of selling defective vehicles that can accelerate suddenly and that lack an effective automatic emergency braking system. A joint trial is scheduled for mid-2023.

Lopez's family, in court documents, alleges that the car "suddenly and unintentionally accelerated to an excessive, unsafe and uncontrollable speed." Nieves-Lopez's family further asserts that Riad was an unsafe driver, with multiple moving infractions on his record, and couldn't handle the high-performance Tesla.

Separately, NHTSA is investigating a dozen crashes in which a Tesla on Autopilot ran into several parked emergency vehicles. In the crashes under investigation, at least 17 people were injured and one person was killed.

Asked about the manslaughter charges against Riad, the agency issued a statement saying there is no vehicle on sale that can drive itself. And whether or not a car is using a partially automated system, the agency said, "every vehicle requires the human driver to be in control at all times."

NHTSA added that all state laws hold human drivers responsible for operation of their vehicles. Though automated systems can help drivers avoid crashes, the agency said, the technology must be used responsibly.

Rafaela Vasquez, the driver in the Uber autonomous test vehicle, was charged in 2020 with negligent homicide after the SUV fatally struck a pedestrian in suburban Phoenix in 2018. Vasquez has pleaded not guilty. Arizona prosecutors declined to file criminal charges against Uber.

Norway mass killer seeks parole 10 years after attacks

By DAVID KEYTON and KARL RITTER Associated Press

SKIEN, Norway (AP) — Anders Behring Breivik, the Norwegian far-right fanatic who killed 77 people in bomb-and-gun massacres in 2011, argued Tuesday for an early release from prison, telling a parole judge he had renounced violence even as he professed white supremacist views and flashed Nazi salutes.

Breivik, 42, is serving Norway's maximum 21-year sentence for setting off a bomb in Oslo's government district and carrying out a shooting massacre at a summer camp for left-wing youth activists. Under Norwegian law, he is eligible for his first parole hearing after 10 years in prison.

Though experts agree Breivik is highly unlikely to be released, authorities have insisted he has the same rights as any other prisoner, arguing that treating him differently would undermine the principles that underpin Norwegian society, including the rule of law and freedom of speech.

At the three-day hearing, which is taking place in the high-security prison in Skien, south of Oslo, where he is being held in isolation with three cells at his disposal, Breivik made full use of his rights.

Sporting a stubble beard and a two-piece suit, he entered the makeshift courtroom in a prison gymnasium by raising his right hand in a Nazi salute and holding up homemade signs with white supremacist messages. One sign was pinned to his suit.

Asked by the prosecutor who the messages were aimed at, he said they were directed at millions of people "who support white power."

The Associated Press resists being used as a conduit for speech or images that espouse hate or spread propaganda and is not publishing images showing Breivik's Nazi salutes and other white supremacist propaganda.

Breivik has used previous court hearings to disseminate conspiracy theories of an ongoing genocide against white people in the West. Some worry he could inspire like-minded people to carry out similar attacks. But since his criminal trial in 2012, many Norwegians have insisted that the best way to defy his world view is to stand up for a tolerant, open society and show that the system he claims is oppressing him in fact is giving him every chance to have his day in court.

Kristin Bergtora Sandvik, a law professor at Oslo University, said Breivik was pushing the boundaries in Tuesday's hearing.

"At the same time, it's fairly clear that the prosecutor has a very clear strategy here," she said. "By letting him speak ... he gets his very incoherent message out in the open."

In a rambling monologue to the court, Breivik argued there is a distinction between militant and nonmilitant white nationalists and said he had been brainwashed by the former when he carried out his attacks in Oslo and at the summer retreat on Utoya island.

"Today, I strongly dissociate myself from violence and terror," he said. "I hereby give you my word of honor that this is behind me forever."

Reminding the court of the scale of the attacks, prosecutor Hulda Karlsdottir read the names of each of Breivik's victims, many of them teenagers on the annual retreat. Many were shot multiple times and some drowned as they tried to swim from the island in panic. During the criminal trial, Breivik said he considered the victims traitors for embracing multiculturalism and that he regretted not having killed even more.

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Karlsdottir stressed the parole hearing was not about re-examining guilt, saying, "The main topic here is the danger associated with release."

Breivik didn't express any remorse, saying only that he cries for victims on "both sides" in what he described as a culture war.

The court is set to sit until Thursday and a ruling is expected later this month.

During a break in the proceedings, Breivik's lawyer Øystein Storrvik was asked whether his client was using the hearing to spread his propaganda.

"That is a right he has under Norwegian law," he was quoted as saying by national broadcaster NRK. "Whether what he chooses to say is wise or not is another matter."

Groups representing survivors and families of victims have said they won't comment during the hearing. Before the session, Lisbeth Kristine Røyneland, who heads a support group, said she was afraid Breivik would use the opportunity "to talk freely and convey his extreme views to people who have the same mindset."

Breivik was declared criminally sane in his trial, even though the prosecution argued that he was psychotic. He didn't appeal his sentence but unsuccessfully sued the government for human rights violations for denying him the right to communicate with sympathizers.

Although Norway's maximum sentence is 21 years, Breivik could be held longer under a provision that allows authorities to keep criminals in prison for as long as they're considered a menace to society.

Breivik has been trying to start a fascist party in prison and reached out by mail to likeminded extremists in Europe and the United States. Prison officials seized many of those letters, fearing he would inspire other violent attacks. Ahead of the parole hearing, Randi Rosenqvist, the psychiatrist who has followed Breivik since 2012, said she could "not detect great changes in Breivik's functioning."

Climate change makes the future of Nordic skiing uncertain

By MARTHA BELLISLE Associated Press

WINTHROP, Wash. (AP) — For the first time in 32 years, organizers of the Rendezvous Cross Country Ski Festival in West Yellowstone, Montana, had to cancel November's traditional start-of-the-ski-season event due to a lack of snow.

Some 300 miles away, Soldier Hollow Nordic Center in Utah offered skiing in November by building an elaborate snow-making system while a small operation in Vermont was able to double its ski days after laying new pipe to feed the water-hungry snow-blowers. That wouldn't work at Methow Trails in northern Washington, which can't possibly cover its 200 kilometers (124 miles) of ski tracks with artificial snow; instead, they do snow dances and work on plans to move trails to higher elevation if needed.

The snow hasn't stopped falling but it is certainly not piling up as much or as far as it used to amid climate change and it is hitting a sport that saw wild growth when COVID-19 hit in the winter of 2020. Many escaped cabin fever by hitting cross country ski trails for the exercise, the fresh air and the serenity.

Nordic skis quickly became the new toilet paper – they were hard to find and sold out in stores.

"What COVID did was push people outside," said Reese Brown, executive director of the Vermont-based Cross Country Ski Areas Association. "It brought a huge number of new people to cross country skiing because it's the perfect winter sport."

Still, climate change makes the future of all skiing uncertain, from the elite World Cup circuits and sprawling resorts to the mom-and-pop operations that bustle on weekends with recreational skiers. For cross country centers, warmer temperatures mean more precipitation is falling in the form of rain instead of snow, forcing them to look to snow-making equipment to cover their trails.

The scarcity of water and costs make that option impossible for some, especially in the American West. A new study predicts that mountain states will be in a "low-to-no snow" predicament within 35 to 60 years if greenhouse gas emissions continue at current levels.

The problems have already affected top athletes who spend more time on snow than most. A lack of snow made early-season training difficult for many top cross country ski racers and biathletes as they

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prepared for the Winter Olympics in Beijing next month. A group of U.S. Ski Team members went to Germany in the fall to train in a ski tunnel.

"In cross country skiing, we see the impact of climate change in the towns that we go through," said Olympic gold medalist Jessie Diggins of Afton, Minnesota. "There are years where they only have man-made snow and 2 kilometers of skiing on a tiny little hamster loop."

When the team trained in a small town in northern Finland that traditionally is guaranteed snow in mid-November, the tracks were limited.

"We were skiing on a ribbon of dirty, manmade snow and there was green moss and little purple flowers blooming on the side of the trail," Diggins said. "It looks wrong and feels wrong."

Tim Burke, a retired U.S. biathlete who has competed in four Winter Games, said he has seen the impact of climate change throughout his career. Places like West Yellowstone used to have reliable snow for early season training "but that's just not true anymore."

Marine Dusser Bjornsen is a former member of the French biathlon team who now lives in Winthrop, Washington, where she runs a ski shop with her husband, retired U.S. ski team member Erik Bjornsen. She watched Nordic skiing explode after COVID-19 hit, but she's also seen how climate change depletes the snowpack.

"When I was 15, 16, we would go to glacier to ski and it was groomed," she said. "Now those glaciers don't exist anymore. It's just rock."

Nordic skiers and biathletes are made in the summer, the saying goes, but climate change has cut into offseason training.

Brian Halligan, biathlon training director at Auburn Ski Club Training Center in Truckee, California, said smoke from the wildfires that hit the Lake Tahoe area in September killed their fall season.

"We're actually thinking of implementing some training camp trips to the East Coast or maybe down in the Bay Area to basically avoid the smoke so we can continue training," he said.

West Coast wildfires even impacted training in the east, according to Olympic biathlete Susan Dunklee, who lives in Vermont.

"I could taste the smoke in the air," Dunklee said. "The change in the air quality puts a stress on your lungs."

Methow Trails, on the east side of the Cascade mountains, boasts of being the largest cross country trail system in North America, with those 124 miles of groomed track that run between the towns of Winthrop and Mazama thanks to agreements with more than 200 state, federal and private landowners.

The operation is a significant contributor to the region's economy to the tune of more than \$12 million per season, said James DeSalvo, the trail system's executive director.

"There would be drastic consequences if the snow melted," he said.

Methow's operators have spent years developing contingencies for a low-snow or no-snow winter, but those plans don't include snowmaking. The trail system is just too big.

"And then there's the environmental piece — water," DeSalvo said. "There's already a moratorium on drilling wells in the county."

One option is to move the trails to higher elevations, he said, taking advantage of old logging roads.

"This is one of our strategic priorities and has been for over a decade," he said. "We are very worried about it."

While not an option everywhere, snowmaking has breathed new life into some cross country ski areas that saw the snow disappear.

"If you look at the Alpine ski industry 30 or 40 years ago, they were where we are now with cross country," Brown said. "You had some alpine areas that had some snowmaking and others that didn't have any and it was a struggle. Now virtually every alpine ski area has 50 to 100% snowmaking capacity."

Some smaller Nordic centers in Vermont were able to get set up with snow-making systems for \$65,000 to \$80,000, Brown said. These involve blowing snow into a pile and using front-end loaders to move the snow around the trails.

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Riker Nordic Center in Ripton, Vermont, made a bigger investment and went from 70 days of skiing to 140 thanks to HKD snowmaking equipment. The initial cost topped \$850,000 and it's about \$40,000 every season to maintain the system, which includes labor and electricity, Brown said.

Luke Bodensteiner, general manager of the Soldier Hollow center where cross country skiing and biathlon races took place during the 2002 Salt Lake City Olympics, said climate change has reduced the snow they see each year.

"The natural winters are definitely getting shorter. No question about it," he said. "We've probably lost two to three weeks early season skiing on natural snow on both the front end and the back end of the year since this place was established."

Utah is hoping to host the Winter Olympics in 2030 or 2034. Soldier Hollow has invested in state-of-the-art snow-making equipment to make that work. It helps that they sit at an elevation of 5,900 feet (1,798 meters) with colder temperatures. Still, the changing climate has made an impact.

"We've been able to kind of keep pace with our historical opening days but we do it far less often on natural snow and far more often on manmade snow," Bodensteiner said.

Tarnished Gold: Illegal mining stokes Indigenous divisions

By SAM COWIE Associated Press

RAPOSA SERRA DO SOL INDIGENOUS TERRITORY, Brazil (AP) — The mining encampment that stretches across a mountainside in Brazil's Amazon is dotted with plastic tarpaulin covers. Under them, dozens of men toil in rocky pits, excavating sacks of ore to be transported by truck. Gold will be extracted from the ore.

Of all places this squatter settlement shouldn't exist, it's here: in Brazil's northernmost Roraima state that doesn't permit gold prospecting, inside one of the nation's Indigenous reserves where mining activity is illegal and on the flanks of this mountain – Serra do Atola – that traditional leaders of the Macuxi people hold sacred.

Nevertheless, a recent visit by The Associated Press – at the invitation of local leaders from the Maturuca and Waromada villages – found the illegal mining site back up and running just months after authorities shut it down.

That the miners have returned in droves underscores the insatiable lure of gold and the fact they are being encouraged to keep up their work – including by the nation's president.

Such relentless pressure is rekindling long-standing divisions in local communities here on the Raposa Serra do Sol reserve about the best path forward for their collective well-being. Some local leaders see gold mining and other extractive activities as a potential boon for the area that could bring jobs and investments in one of Brazil's poorest states. Others see the mining as defiling the land on the reserve by polluting the waters, stripping bare the land, as well as upending centuries-old cultural traditions.

An AP investigation found that illegal landing strips and unauthorized airplanes have helped miners carry out tons of gold mined on Indigenous lands. The gold ends up in the hands of brokers, some of whom are under investigation by authorities for receiving gold from illegal mining. The gold is refined in Sao Paulo before becoming part of the global supply chain where it is used in products such as smartphones and computers.

Last March, the Amazon military command, federal police and environmental agencies raided mining operations at Serra do Atola mountain and found 400 people, excavation pits, precision scales and mercury for gold processing. Tribal leaders had previously filed complaints to prosecutors of bars, drugs and prostitution at the sacred site's base.

The mining site is just one of several. The number of wildcat miners at sites across the reserve has surged to some 2,000, according to Edinho Batista Macuxi, general coordinator of Roraima's Indigenous Council, the state's primary representative body that says it represents some 30,000 people.

Macuxi said that the illegal mining operations on the reserve were financed by local non-Indigenous business owners and politicians who were the owners of the equipment needed to extract the gold from the ore. A 2020 Federal Police raid on the reserve - in which four tribespeople were arrested – seems

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to support those allegations. The police found the gold illegally extracted would be split three ways: a quarter would be paid to the owners of equipment used to extract the gold, 4% to the local community where the mining operations were active, and the rest to the miners who had extracted the gold.

Macuxi attributes the resilience of the illegal activity to the fiery, pro-mining rhetoric of Brazil's far-right President Jair Bolsonaro. The president has sought to legalize prospecting on reserves across the country, saying they are underutilized and should bring socioeconomic gains to the impoverished region.

"The president is most to blame," Macuxi told the AP. "There is great incentive coming directly from the state."

Bolsonaro's endorsement of mining resonates with those locals who support greater economic development with the support from outsiders, Macuxi said. Some view gold prospecting as beneficial or are involved directly themselves.

"They are a minority," said Macuxi. "They are used as puppets to justify these types of projects."

Bolsonaro has said that Indigenous people should be entitled to self-determination — not just regarding possible mining, but all activities. He publicly opposed Raposa Serra do Sol's designation as a protected reserve in 2005 and often holds it up as an example of a large swath of land ripe for productive activities.

The president visited the reserve last October and, donning a traditional tribal headdress, shared with a cheering crowd of villagers his plans to present legislation that would allow mining, monoculture crop cultivation and infrastructure projects like dams on reserves.

"This bill is not an imposition. It says if you want to plant, go plant. If you're going to mine, you're going to mine," he told the Flechal community, where illegal mining is also present.

In the background, banners of the Defense Society of the United Indigenous People of Roraima, which supports mining on the reserve, hung on the wall. The group purports to represent 22,000 people across Roraima.

Unlike many reserves in the Brazilian Amazon featuring lush rainforest, Raposa Serra do Sol is mostly tropical savannah. Bordering Venezuela and Guyana, it is larger than the state of Connecticut and home to 26,000 people from five different ethnicities.

Since the Brazilian government granted its protected status, it has been a stage for sporadic violence often driven by disagreements over whether non-Indigenous farmers could remain in the territory.

In November, state military police broke up checkpoints established by Macuxi people opposed to the illegal mining; six of them were injured with rubber bullets.

When AP reporters visited the reserve the same month, they still had to pass through checkpoints aimed at warding off invaders and stopping the spread of COVID-19. The rugged terrain is only passable in a four-wheel drive vehicle or motorcycle.

The AP also witnessed illegal miners working in pits on the side of the sacred mountain, equipped with barrels of fuel and portable generators used to power jackhammers to break up the rocky surface.

From the encampment, trucks transported sacks of rocks that prospectors hope contain granules of gold to properties outside the mining site.

There, they are put through crushing machines in order to extract gold. In the vicinity, lookouts alert the presence of any unknown or suspicious vehicles.

Elsewhere in the reserve, in the Mutum community along the Ireng River that forms part of Brazil's border with Guyana, two men sat aboard a mining barge. One held a pan for separating the gold from sediment using mercury. The process is ubiquitous across Brazil's Amazon and it irreversibly poisons locals' waterways and fisheries, according to federal prosecutors and decades of research in the region, including by the government's Fiocruz health institute.

The president of the smaller pro-Bolsonaro Indigenous group, Irisnaide de Souza Silva, has met with the president personally, including in the capital, Brasilia.

She told the AP that her organization is trying to kick-start a project to plant 30,000 hectares (74,000 acres) of soybeans on the reserve.

"We're very focused on this project, it's innovative," she said.

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The farming initiative dovetails with a program that Brazil's Indigenous agency created under Bolsonaro, dubbed "Indigenous Independence." It enables rural producers and organizations to partner with Indigenous people within reserves to mass produce crops.

The program has been fiercely criticized by activists who say ancestral lands and traditions should be preserved, and who point out that the expertise and capital come from people outside the reserve.

They argue large-scale farms on reserves stand to deepen a trend already taking place with illegal mining: outsiders reaping outsized benefits while local communities receive scraps, plus the environmental damages.

The Indigenous agency's press office confirmed to the AP in an email that it was aware of the proposed soybean project, which isn't part of its "Indigenous Independence" initiative. The agency described its program as a means to help improve villages' living conditions and provide "dignity" to local people.

Critics say that couldn't be farther from the truth.

"It's a contemporary way of doing what the colonizers did in the 16th century and 17th century," said Antenor Vaz, a former member of the agency, who is now retired and consulting on issues relating to isolated tribes. "What's really happening is the appropriation of Indigenous lands by outsiders."

Vaz said that Raposa Serra do Sol could represent the future for Brazil's Indigenous lands far and wide if Bolsonaro's development-oriented policies continue.

"Inside any community differences exist," he added. "Bolsonaro is stoking these differences when he only visits communities inside the territory that are in favor of these projects."

US faces wave of omicron deaths in coming weeks, models say

By CARLA K. JOHNSON AP Medical Writer

The fast-moving omicron variant may cause less severe disease on average, but COVID-19 deaths in the U.S. are climbing and modelers forecast 50,000 to 300,000 more Americans could die by the time the wave subsides in mid-March.

The seven-day rolling average for daily new COVID-19 deaths in the U.S. has been trending upward since mid-November, reaching nearly 1,700 on Jan. 17 — still below the peak of 3,300 in January 2021. COVID-19 deaths among nursing home residents started rising slightly two weeks ago, although still at a rate 10 times less than last year before most residents were vaccinated.

Despite signs omicron causes milder disease on average, the unprecedented level of infection spreading through the country, with cases still soaring in many states, means many vulnerable people will become severely sick. If the higher end of projections comes to pass, that would push total U.S. deaths from COVID-19 over 1 million by early spring.

"A lot of people are still going to die because of how transmissible omicron has been," said University of South Florida epidemiologist Jason Salemi. "It unfortunately is going to get worse before it gets better."

Morgues are starting to run out of space in Johnson County, Kansas, said Dr. Sanmi Areola, director of the health department. More than 30 residents have died in the county this year, the vast majority of them unvaccinated.

But the notion that a generally less severe variant could still take the lives of thousands of people has been difficult for health experts to convey. The math of it — that a small percentage of a very high number of infections can yield a very high number of deaths — is difficult to visualize.

"Overall, you're going to see more sick people even if you as an individual have a lower chance of being sick," said Katriona Shea of Pennsylvania State University, who co-leads a team that pulls together several pandemic models and shares the combined projections with the White House.

The wave of deaths heading for the United States will crest in late January or early February, Shea said. In early February, weekly deaths could equal or exceed the delta peak, and possibly even surpass the previous U.S. peak in deaths last year.

Some unknown portion of these deaths are among people infected with the delta variant, but experts say omicron is also claiming lives.

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"This is omicron driven," Shea said of the coming wave of deaths. The combined models project 1.5 million Americans will be hospitalized and 191,000 will die from mid-December through mid-March. Taking into account the uncertainty in the models, U.S. deaths during the omicron wave could range from 58,000 to 305,000.

Yet, it's become increasingly clear that the risk from omicron is lower than from previous variants. New evidence from nearly 70,000 patients in Southern California suggests omicron is causing milder illness than delta.

A study, posted online and cited during a recent White House briefing, found patients with omicron had a 53% lower risk of hospitalization with respiratory symptoms, a 74% lower risk of ICU admission, and a 91% lower risk of death. The study, which has not yet been peer reviewed, comes from researchers at Kaiser Permanente and University of California, Berkeley.

"It's hard for me to say straight out it's good news," said study co-author Sara Y. Tartof, a Kaiser Permanente research scientist. "Maybe there's good news in the sense that if you are infected your chance of becoming severely ill are decreased, but from a societal perspective it's a very heavy burden for us. It remains a serious situation, and we need to maintain practices and behaviors we know protect us."

Overburdened hospitals could also contribute to more deaths, said Marc Lipsitch of Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and scientific director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's forecasting center.

"In places with extremely short staffing and overloads of patients, as the medical professionals have been telling us, the quality of care begins to suffer," Lipsitch said. "That may also lead to higher death rates, but that's not in any of the models that I'm aware of."

Hong Kong to kill 2,000 animals after hamsters get COVID-19

By ZEN SOO Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — Hong Kong authorities said Tuesday that they will kill about 2,000 small animals, including hamsters, after several tested positive for the coronavirus at a pet store where an employee was also infected.

The city will also stop the sale of hamsters and the import of small mammals, according to officials from the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department. The pet shop employee tested positive for the delta variant on Monday, and several hamsters imported from the Netherlands at the store tested positive as well.

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, animals do not appear to play a significant role in spreading the coronavirus. But Hong Kong authorities said they are not ruling out transmission between animals and humans.

"We cannot exclude the possibility that the shopkeeper was in fact actually infected from the hamsters," said Edwin Tsui, a controller at the Centre for Health Protection.

While this coronavirus most likely jumped from animals to humans in the first place, the outbreak became a pandemic because the virus spreads so easily between people. Minks are the only known animals to have caught the virus from people and spread it back, according to Dr. Scott Weese at Ontario Veterinary College.

Leung Siu-fai, director of the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department, said during a news conference that owners should keep hamsters at home, and not take them out. "All pet owners should observe good personal hygiene, and after you have been in contact with animals and their food, you should wash your hands," he said.

"Do not kiss your pets," he added.

Customers who purchased hamsters from the store after Jan. 7 will be traced and be subject to mandatory quarantine and must hand over their hamsters to authorities to be put down, officials said.

They said all pet stores in Hong Kong must stop selling hamsters and that about 2,000 small mammals, including hamsters and chinchillas, will be killed in a humane manner.

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Customers who bought hamsters in Hong Kong from Dec. 22 will be subject to mandatory testing and are urged not contact others until their tests have returned negative. If their hamsters test positive, they will be subject to quarantine.

Hong Kong's Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals said it was "shocked and concerned" by the decision to kill the animals, and urged the government not to "take any drastic action before reviewing its approach."

Hong Kong has been grappling with a local omicron outbreak traced to several Cathay Pacific crew members who dined at bars and restaurants across the city before testing positive for the omicron variant.

The government announced late Monday that two former flight attendants have been arrested for leaving their homes during quarantine and later being confirmed to have coronavirus infections. It did not identify their employer, but said the two arrived from the U.S. on Dec. 24 and 25 and "conducted unnecessary activities" while under medical surveillance.

The arrests came after Cathay Pacific said it had fired two crew members for breaching coronavirus protocols. It previously apologized and called their actions "extremely disappointing." The company had to cut back on flights — both passenger and cargo — in January because of tightened virus curbs.

The two have been released on bail and will have their case heard in court on Feb. 9. If convicted of violating anti-epidemic regulations, they could face up to six months' imprisonment and a fine of up to 5,000 Hong Kong dollars (\$642).

Previously in Hong Kong, some air and sea crew members could isolate at home under quarantine exemptions. Regulations were tightened on Dec. 31 to require crew members to isolate in a designated quarantine hotel for about a week.

NBA at 75: Dr. J says players from many eras built league

By JULIUS ERVING For The Associated Press

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Hall of Famer Julius Erving, an NBA and ABA champion, is considered one of the greatest basketball players ever and one of the sport's finest ambassadors. He is an 11-time NBA All-Star and league MVP. As part of an Associated Press series on the NBA at 75, the player known as "Dr. J" shares some of the experiences that provided him with the foundation to help lead the transformation of the league during the 1980s.)

Those of us who played in the NBA in the 1980s definitely played a role in what the league has become today.

And I think that in communicating with the next generation of players, they gave a lot of credit to myself and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. If you start in 1980, and you look at the guys who were the All-Pro players, the MVPs or whatever, there was an acceptance, and there was the crossing-over between the different ethnicities that created a pretty good melting pot.

I look at the commercial success that happened with myself, with Larry Bird, with Converse and Spalding as an example, and the next wave with Magic Johnson and Michael Jordan. It didn't just happen. There were shoulders we were standing on.

There was Bill Russell, who's been a dear friend for many, many years. Oscar Robertson, Jerry West, and even the lesser-celebrated guys like Walt Bellamy, Lou Hudson, Pete Maravich. We were just trying to kind of give them credit and understand their struggle. They were always taking commercial flights. Before that, I mean, there were guys taking trains and buses. It is so much different now.

And so, over these decades, the eight decades of the NBA, there has been growth from within. That has created an image, a global image, and without all the parts you wouldn't have the total sum.

I was a Salvation Army kid. I knew about being part of something bigger than yourself. John Havlicek and I, we were endorsers for the Special Olympics. The public service ads and the public service involvement led to the commercial endorsements because people realized that the same guys, those same people doing public service ads could be good pitchmen, good spokesmen.

If you elected to volunteer to do that and you gave up your time and your name, face and likeness, that

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was a gateway. Wall Street could see it just like anybody else and say, 'This guy's pitching the Salvation Army, he's pitching the Special Olympics, so maybe he could pitch my shoe, maybe he could pitch my toothpaste.'

Being a Salvation Army kid, that was always in my mind. It helped make me who I am. That's where I played basketball. That's where I learned to travel and be a good representative of the entity that I'm traveling with. And so, we'd get in the station wagon and we'd go all over Long Island, we'd go to New Jersey, we went to Pennsylvania. And to be on the traveling team, that was very important. When you went, you had to behave and you had to represent your family and you had to represent the Corps, and you had to represent where you were from. And so that helped you in terms of communicating with people and trusting people.

I was 11 when that started. It became a fixture in my life, even today. I'm 71 years old, but I love talking about it even now. A couple months ago I did a program at the Salvation Army, a fundraising program. The guy who coached me when I was 11, he was 19. And he's still a great friend. He kind of left the Corps, became the mayor of the town, Hempstead.

He remembers when I wouldn't have two nickels to rub together, living in a housing project and he said, "Hey, you want to do something different? Let's go ask your mom if you can have permission to go down to the Salvation Army and play basketball inside instead of playing outside, especially in the middle of the winter." I've always regarded that as being pivotal to my life.

I never could have envisioned what my life has become, and I don't think the NBA could envision what it has become today.

Biden year one takeaways: Grand ambitions, humbling defeats

By The Associated Press undefined

Joe Biden's long arc in public life has always had one final ambition: to sit behind the Resolute Desk of the Oval Office.

He achieved it — albeit, at 78, as the oldest person to assume the presidency. After the turbulence and chaos of his predecessor, Donald Trump, Biden was seen by voters as one who could restore a sense of normalcy and a reassuring tone to the White House.

But Biden also found out, as all his predecessors have, that events beyond his control would shape his time in office and the public's assessment of him.

Takeaways from The Associated Press' White House team on Biden's first year as president:

BIG AMBITIONS

Biden started his presidency with more than \$4 trillion worth of big ideas — his eyes larger than what the Senate could stomach.

\$1.9 trillion worth of coronavirus relief passed in March, which in many first years in office would have been considered a signature achievement.

But Biden kept asking for more: an additional \$2.3 trillion for infrastructure and jobs, and another \$1.8 trillion for families.

After some tortuous negotiations, he got a version of his infrastructure plan passed and even got more than a dozen Republicans in the Senate to vote for it.

But attention spans are short. Biden's \$1.8 trillion package, which he labeled "Build Back Better," had elements that included a wish list of Democratic priorities for the past decade — a child care tax credit, climate legislation, paid family leave and universal prekindergarten, among other provisions.

So far, it looks like the bill was not, to turn the expression on its head, too big to fail. Republicans abandoned him on this, and several Democrats were also skeptics. Then inflation surged, and the plan's chances plummeted.

— By Josh Boak

HE STILL THINKS LIKE A SENATOR

Biden was a senator for nearly four decades, so it's perhaps no surprise that he brings a legislator's

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mindset to his presidency.

Known as an adept negotiator from his time in the Senate, Biden still immerses himself in legislative negotiations and is versed in the minutiae of his proposals. He believes in the value of personal connections and face-to-face conversations in negotiating details, frequently calling key senators or having lawmakers meet with him at the White House.

Biden emphasizes the need for bipartisanship, a value he held dear in the Senate. But it's one that, in today's sharply divided Washington, feels out of touch with the moment.

Biden also keeps the schedule of a senator: He's often late to events and likes to get out of town on the weekends, returning home to Delaware.

One major difference? Now he's riding Air Force One instead of Amtrak.

— By Alexandra Jaffe

SHOOTING HIGH AND FALLING SHORT

Biden inherited a long list of unfulfilled Democratic policy priorities when he took office, but despite his best efforts, most remain so.

Taking office after Trump's efforts to subvert the will of voters, no issue seemed so urgent for Biden as the push for legislation on voting protections.

Biden's attempt to break a logjam on the legislation by pushing for the Senate to change its rules to pass bills by a simple majority was quashed before it even really began by two moderate members of his own party.

It was emblematic of how Biden's central rationale for his presidency — his nearly four decades in Washington uniquely positioned him to deliver on an immensely ambitious agenda — seems increasingly out of step with today's politics.

Biden bet unsuccessfully that personal relationships, private cajoling and public arm-twisting could overcome years of increasingly bitter partisan divisions and ideological disagreements.

The lack of progress on voting rights, immigration, climate change, gun control and abortion protections remains an unmet burden.

— By Zeke Miller

NO OBAMA 2.0

Biden came to office trumpeting "America is back," his shorthand message to allies and adversaries that the days of Trump's inward-looking "America first" foreign policy were over.

But his approach to the world has also been notable for its determination to avoid some of the missteps of his old boss, Barack Obama.

Biden stood by his pledge to meet an August deadline to end the war in Afghanistan even as military commanders and some political allies urged him to slow down what ended up being a chaotic and bloody U.S. military withdrawal. As vice president, Biden had opposed Obama's move to surge more U.S. troops into the country. But the exit Biden presided over was widely criticized for its haste and execution, which included U.S. troop casualties.

Biden also came to office with a greater deal of skepticism than Obama — and Trump and George W. Bush for that matter — about Russian President Vladimir Putin. Obama sought to "reset" the U.S.-Russia relationship. By 2014, after a series of earlier disappointments, Obama's hope for a reset had evaporated when Russia seized the Black Sea peninsula of Crimea from Ukraine.

Biden made it clear early on that his highest hope for the Putin relationship was finding a measure of stability and predictability. With his administration pressing Putin to step back from Russia's current troop buildup on the Ukraine border, it remains to be seen if Biden's approach will net better results.

— By Aamer Madhani

A GILDED CAGE

For a man who wanted to get to the White House in the worst way for decades, Biden doesn't seem that enamored with the place.

Over his first year in office, he's spent at least a portion of 99 days in his home state of Delaware, mostly during weekend trips and amounting to more than a fourth of his presidency. It's a short jaunt

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that requires a massive operation involving security contingents, press pools, helicopters and buses.

As for the White House, Biden calls his accommodations on Pennsylvania Avenue a bit of a "gilded cage in terms of being able to walk outside and do things."

"I said when I was running, I wanted to be president not to live in the White House but to be able to make the decisions about the future of the country," he said in a CNN interview.

The vice presidential residence in Northwest D.C., which sits on 80 acres (32 hectares), was very different, he said.

"You can walk off a porch in the summer and jump in a pool, and, you know, go into work," he said. "You can ride a bicycle around and never leave the property."

— By Colleen Long

ALL ABOUT BEAU

Biden's late son, Beau, sometimes seems as much a part of Biden's presidency as Biden himself.

Biden works references to his son into speeches and other public remarks, and sometimes wears a baseball cap bearing the logo of Beau's child protection foundation.

Beau was being groomed to follow his father into national politics -- and perhaps one day be president. He was a Delaware attorney general, served in the state's Army National Guard and advised his father politically.

Brain cancer took him away from his wife and two young children in 2015 at age 46. He's the second child Biden has buried; a 1972 car wreck killed the president's first wife and baby daughter.

Biden said during his 2020 presidential campaign that Beau should have been the candidate.

On the eve of his swearing-in, a tearful Biden said his "one regret" was that Beau wasn't alive "because we should be introducing him as president."

— By Darlene Superville

BETTER AT BEING A VP THAN HAVING A VP

Obama did not choose Biden because the two were personally close. He chose him because he added some foreign policy heft and experience and could serve as a bridge to Congress.

But over time, the two became personally closer. Obama tasked Biden with being the "sheriff" to oversee how money in the 2009 stimulus bill was spent during the financial crisis. He also assigned him to help fashion a plan to end the war in Iraq.

When Biden was considering a run to succeed Obama in 2016, the president was cool to the idea and his vice president bowed out in favor of Hillary Clinton.

Still, Obama's regard for his vice president was on display at the end of their tenure, when he presented Biden with the Medal of Freedom in an emotional ceremony.

Biden's relationship with Vice President Kamala Harris hasn't been nearly as smooth.

Her role in the job is historic: She's the first woman and first Asian and Black vice president. But she's struggled to find her footing, and Biden hasn't been much of a guide, though the two insist publicly that their relationship is solid.

Biden has assigned Harris some of the administration's most difficult issues, including immigration and voting rights. And while Biden himself served as top cop on the stimulus law, he gave the task of overseeing spending from his \$1 trillion infrastructure law instead to a former mayor, Mitch Landrieu of New Orleans, rather than his vice president.

— By Colleen Long

ALL THE PRESIDENT'S CZARS

From infrastructure to COVID-19 response, Biden has hired White House coordinators to marshal the resources of the federal government to implement his policies. In the case of combating climate change, Biden went so far as to put two in place — Gina McCarthy to lead the domestic initiative and former Secretary of State John Kerry to lead it globally.

Biden knows a thing or two about czars: He was one, when he led the implementation of the American Recovery Act for President Barack Obama. But it's telling that rather than relying on Cabinet secretaries

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or his own vice president, he's chosen experienced and often politically connected managers like Gene Sperling, who leads implementation of the COVID-19 relief bill, and Jeff Zients, who runs the government response to the virus.

This reflects not just the Biden White House's technocratic streak but also the centralization of power within the West Wing.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Wednesday, Jan. 19, the 19th day of 2022. There are 346 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Jan. 19, 1981, the United States and Iran signed an accord paving the way for the release of 52 Americans held hostage for more than 14 months.

On this date:

In 1853, Giuseppe Verdi's opera "Il Trovatore" premiered in Rome.

In 1861, Georgia became the fifth state to secede from the Union.

In 1915, Germany carried out its first air raid on Britain during World War I as a pair of Zeppelins dropped bombs onto Great Yarmouth and King's Lynn in England.

In 1942, during World War II, Japanese forces captured the British protectorate of North Borneo. A German submarine sank the Canadian liner RMS Lady Hawkins off Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, killing 251 people; 71 survived.

In 1944, the federal government relinquished control of the nation's railroads to their owners following settlement of a wage dispute.

In 1953, CBS-TV aired the widely watched episode of "I Love Lucy" in which Lucy Ricardo, played by Lucille Ball, gave birth to Little Ricky. (By coincidence, Ball gave birth the same day to her son, Desi Arnaz Jr.)

In 1966, Indira Gandhi was chosen to be prime minister of India by the National Congress party.

In 1987, Guy Hunt became Alabama's first Republican governor since 1874 as he was sworn into office, succeeding George C. Wallace.

In 2005, the American Cancer Society reported that cancer had passed heart disease as the top killer of Americans age 85 and younger.

In 2006, Vice President Dick Cheney defended the administration's domestic surveillance program, calling it an essential tool in monitoring al-Qaida and other terrorist organizations.

In 2009, Russia and Ukraine signed a deal restoring natural gas shipments to Ukraine and paving the way for an end to the nearly two-week cutoff of most Russian gas to a freezing Europe.

In 2020, health officials in central China reported that 17 more people had been diagnosed with the new coronavirus, which had killed two patients and placed other countries on alert.

Ten years ago: Six U.S. Marines were killed in a helicopter crash in southern Afghanistan. Texas Gov. Rick Perry abruptly quit the Republican presidential race. One of the world's most popular file-sharing sites, Megaupload.com, was shut down as its founder and several company officials were accused of facilitating millions of illegal downloads of films, music and other content. Rupert Murdoch's media empire apologized and agreed to cash payouts to 37 people who'd been harassed and phone-hacked by its tabloid press.

Five years ago: With fireworks heralding his big moment, Donald Trump swept into Washington on the eve of his presidential inauguration and pledged to unify a nation sorely divided and clamoring for change. Actor Miguel Ferrer died at his Los Angeles home at age 61.

One year ago: On President Donald Trump's last full day in office, Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell placed blame on Trump for the riot at the Capitol on Jan. 6; McConnell said the mob had been "fed lies," and that Trump and others "provoked" those who were intent on overturning Democrat Joe Biden's election. Twelve National Guard members were removed from the security operation for Biden's inauguration after vetting by the FBI, including two who had made extremist statements in posts or texts

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about the event. The U.S. death toll from the coronavirus eclipsed 400,000 in Trump's waning hours in office. Just before midnight, Trump signed a flurry of pardons and commutations for more than 140 people, including his former chief strategist, Steve Bannon, as well as rap performers and ex-members of Congress. Don Sutton, a Hall of Fame pitcher for the Los Angeles Dodgers, died at 75.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Tippi Hedren is 92. Former PBS newsman Robert MacNeil is 91. Movie director Richard Lester is 90. Actor-singer Michael Crawford is 80. Actor Shelley Fabares (fab-RAY') is 78. Country singer Dolly Parton is 76. Former ABC newswoman Ann Compton is 75. TV chef Paula Deen is 75. Rock singer Martha Davis is 71. Singer Dewey Bunnell (America) is 70. Actor Desi Arnaz Jr. is 69. Actor Katey Sagal is 68. Comedian Paul Rodriguez is 67. Conductor Sir Simon Rattle is 67. Rock musician Jeff Pilson (Foreigner) is 64. Actor Paul McCrane is 61. Actor William Ragsdale is 61. Basketball coach and commentator Jeff Van Gundy is 60. International Tennis Hall of Famer Stefan Edberg is 56. Rock singer Whitfield Crane (Ugly Kid Joe) is 54. Singer Trey Lorenz is 53. Actor Shawn Wayans is 51. Rock singer-musician John Wozniak (Marcy Playground) is 51. Actor Drea (DRAY-uh') de Matteo is 50. Comedian-impressionist Frank Caliendo is 48. Actor Drew Powell is 46. Actor Marsha Thomason is 46. Actor Bitsie Tulloch is 41. Actor Jodie Sweetin is 40. U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg is 40. Movie director Damien Chazelle is 37. Actor Shaunette Renee Wilson is 32. Actor Briana Henry is 30. Actor Logan Lerman is 30. Olympic gold medal gymnast Shawn Johnson is 30. Rapper Taylor Bennett is 26. Actor Lidya Jewett is 15.