

Groton Daily Independent

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“

I have learned that there is more power in a good strong hug than in a thousand meaningful words.

Ann Hood



Chicken Soup
for the Soul

UpComing Events

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.

Thursday, Jan. 27

Girls Basketball at Northwestern. JV at 6 p.m. followed by varsity.

Saturday, Jan. 29

Groton Area Wrestling Tournament, 10 a.m.
Boys Basketball at NEC-DAK12 Clash in Madison

Monday, Jan. 31

Junior High Boys Basketball with Redfield at Groton. 7th at 4 p.m. followed by 8th grade game
Tuesday, Feb. 1

Boys Basketball hosts Langford Area with JV at 6 p.m. followed by varsity

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.

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

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Groton Area COVID-19 Report

Groton Area School District

Active COVID-19 Cases

Updated January 20, 2022; 9:43 AM

**Decrease of 4 from
Wednesday**

J	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	1	1	1	S	T
K	G										0	1	2	t	o
														f	a
														f	l
0	2	1	2	1	0	1	2	1	2	2	1	3	4	5	27
Change	0	0	0	0	0	-1	0	-1	0	0	0	0	-2	+3	-4

#504 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

The numbers continue to look bleak. New case reports have been over last winter's peak since December 28; since we last talked, we've had one-day reports of 704,000 on Wednesday, 760,000 on Thursday, 895,000 on Friday, and 450,000 yesterday. Our one-day new-case average was 656,478 at midday today, and we're still showing 200+ percent increases in two weeks. Thirty-seven states have had record new-case numbers in the past week. This isn't as alarming as it was last winter when almost no one was vaccinated, but these are still staggering numbers and some proportion of these sick people is going to die. Worse, at this rate, we're racking up more millions of cases at a brisk clip, passing 58 and 59 million since we last talked with 60 million hitting later today. At midday, we're at 59,848,908. Here's what I have so far:

- April 28, 2020 – 1 million – 98 days
- June 11 – 2 million – 44 days
- July 8 – 3 million – 27 days
- July 23 – 4 million – 15 days
- August 9 – 5 million – 17 days
- August 31 – 6 million – 22 days
- September 24 – 7 million – 24 days
- October 15 – 8 million – 21 days
- October 29 – 9 million – 14 days
- November 8 – 10 million – 10 days
- November 15 – 11 million – 7 days
- November 21 – 12 million – 6 days
- November 27 – 13 million – 6 days

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December 3 – 14 million – 6 days
December 7 – 15 million – 4 days
December 12 – 16 million – 5 days
December 17 – 17 million – 5 days
December 21 – 18 million – 4 days
December 26 – 19 million – 5 days
December 31 – 20 million – 5 days
January 5 – 21 million – 5 days
January 9 – 22 million – 4 days
January 13 – 23 million – 4 days
January 18 – 24 million – 5 days
January 23 – 25 million – 5 days
January 30 – 26 million – 7 days
February 7 – 27 million – 8 days
February 19 – 28 million – 12 days
March 7 – 29 million – 16 days
March 24 – 30 million – 17 days
April 8 – 31 million – 15 days
April 24 – 32 million – 16 days
May 18 – 33 million – 23 days
July 16 – 34 million – 59 days
July 31 – 35 million – 15 days
August 11 – 36 million – 11 days

August 17 – 37 million – 6 days
August 23 – 38 million – 6 days
August 30 – 39 million – 7 days
September 5 – 40 million – 6 days
September 12 – 41 million – 7 days
September 18 – 42 million – 6 days
September 27 – 43 million – 9 days
October 6 – 44 million – 9 days
October 18 – 45 million – 12 days
November 1 – 46 million – 14 days
November 13 – 47 million – 12 days
November 24 – 48 million – 11 days
December 4 – 49 million – 10 days
December 13 – 50 million – 9 days
December 20 – 51 million – 7 days
December 25 – 52 million – 5 days
December 28 – 53 million – 3 days
December 30 – 54 million – 2 days
January 2 – 55 million – 3 days
January 3 – 56 million – 1 day
January 4 – 57 million – 1 day
January 6 – 58 million – 2 days
January 7 – 59 million – 1 day

Hospitalizations at midday were at an average of 125,481 with a count Friday night of 134,000, close to last winter's peak of 142,000 (recorded on January 14). Hospitalizations in children are surging. The number of children under 5 has jumped from 2.6 per 100,000 the last week of 2021 to 4.3 per 100,000 this last week, a 48 percent increase, largest for the age group in the pandemic. Average daily admissions for children under 18 were at 797 last week, also a record and an 80 percent increase from the previous week.

Hospitalization needs to be understood within the context of our current situation. Hospitalization rates are higher than they were with Delta, but still lower a bit than they were last winter. Of course, there's still time for growth, so we'll see what the next few weeks bring. Importantly, fewer of these hospitalized folks are landing in ICUs or on vents, most likely (although we are not yet certain) due to a milder course of infection with the Omicron variant. So why are the hospitals hollering about strains on resources? A couple of things are operating here: (1) With the crazy case numbers we are seeing now, even a smaller percentage of the total cases still stacks up to be one hell of a lot of patients. Hospitals in 644 counties in the US are at capacity, and another 619 are at risk of reaching capacity in the next 10 days; this is out of 2224 counties, so more than half. Almost a quarter of 5000 US hospitals reporting to HHS report a "critical staff shortage" with another 100 expecting a shortage this week; this is the worst report of the pandemic. (2) Most of these admissions are unvaccinated. Admissions of unvaccinated people in New York are at 58 per 100,000 residents, whereas only 4.6 of 100,000 fully-vaccinated people are being admitted, and similar reports are coming from all around the county. Big difference. (3) We have fewer health care workers than ever before. They're quitting at historic rates, and the more who quit, the greater the pressure on those who remain, driving further losses. Not only are hospitals finding it difficult to staff Covid-19 beds, they are also struggling to staff beds for patients with other health conditions. (4) Hospitals in the Midwest went directly from a Delta surge to an Omicron surge; they hadn't even come off their peaks when this started. That means they've been operating in crisis mode for months, not weeks. (5) Staffing shortages at long-term care facilities is exacerbating the pressures on hospitals because the facilities are unable to take patients who should be discharged from the hospital. That's plugging up the system too as

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ready-for-discharge patients occupy beds needed by the folks stacking up in the emergency department waiting for those beds. (6) Elective surgeries are being paused in many places; patients are waiting days or weeks in emergency departments for beds. Some of them aren't coming in for Covid-19, but for other illnesses; but many of these other illnesses are exacerbated by the virus, making their situations worse. Everyone loses in this scenario. Masking and testing help to mitigate these effects, but this is still a surge, and it is compromising the care people receive, even those coming in for something other than Covid-19. It is also putting some institutions on the brink of implementing crisis standards of care—the point at which care is essentially rationed. The good news is that for vaccinated people, hospital stays are shorter and their outcomes are less severe. The more of those we have, the easier things get.

Deaths numbers have finally taken a sharper turn. They've been pretty steady since Christmas, but we had a 25 percent rise in the seven-day average last week to 1524. At midday, we are at 835,835 in the pandemic so far. It's not yet clear what's going to happen with deaths numbers as we go along. No one's predicting we're going to get where we were last winter when we had days with 4000 deaths and averages around 3400; but they're going to keep rising for a while. We do have vaccination coverage, better treatment, and the milder course of Omicron cases to give us hope that we're not going to see these soar. Throughout the pandemic, I've seen a lag of 19 to 21 days between an increase in cases and a corresponding increase in deaths, longer to get records completed and filed when numbers are overwhelming, so it's still early to form a picture. We are seeing some worrisome rises in Northeastern states that hit this surge earliest. We are hopeful the numbers aren't going to be proportionate to the case or hospitalization numbers, but the only way to know for sure is to wait for them to come in.

We are still seeing flight cancellations. On Wednesday, we had 1790 cancellations and 6097 delayed flights in the US. On Thursday, over 2100 US flights were canceled; the reasons are the same as they have been: personnel shortages and weather. It's not letting up: From Friday through today, around 5000 more flights were canceled. This has been going on since Christmas: Staffing shortages caused by Covid-19 compounded by winter storms are playing hell with schedules. Some airlines are asking travelers to consider delaying nonessential travel until later. It's not great for business when you have to ask customers not to buy things from you.

The cruise industry continues to suffer as well. Royal Caribbean is the latest to cancel cruises due to Covid-19. Four ships are involved in the latest cancellations. After a ship was held in Hong Kong last week and Norwegian canceled cruises on eight ships, it was starting to look like there was more trouble in store. The CDC is currently recommending no one go on a cruise at this time.

A new variant has popped up in Cyprus. The first report I can find of it is from Saturday, so it's probably really, really new. This is an interesting one; it appears to add some Omicron-like mutations to a basic Delta platform. The researcher at the University of Cyprus reporting on this variant, Leonidios Kostrikis, professor of biological sciences, is calling it "deltacron" for now. It does not yet have a Pango designation assigned: That is the strange combination of letters and numbers we've see on most of the other variants we've discussed. The findings have been sent to GISAID, the international database for viral variants; I'm guessing the Pango number will follow once its genomic features are fully characterized so that the proper lineage can be indicated in the Pango designation. So far, there appear to be just 25 cases of infection with this variant; work is being done now to determine whether there are more than that. It's too soon to have any idea about its characteristics or how much of a threat it might be; but Kostrikis told Sigma TV on Friday that he believes Omicron will out-compete it. I'm not sure what he's basing that on because I haven't seen any analysis; I imagine this information will become available as we go along. It's too soon to worry about this one, but I wanted to let you know it's out there.

I have an update on vaccinations in the US. We're at 62.4 percent fully vaccinated; that's around 207 million people. Twenty-three percent of us are vaccinated and boosted; but over 20 percent of us haven't had a single dose. We're at just over a million doses per day with almost 60 percent of those boosters; only 30,000 people are initiating vaccination each day. We have at least 75 percent of the population fully vaccinated in five states, all in the Northeast: Maine, Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode

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Island. On the other hand, we have four states—Idaho, Wyoming, Mississippi, and Alabama—with fewer than half their populations fully vaccinated. That spells long-term trouble for our population as a whole, but especially those who live in low-vaccination states irrespective of their own vaccination status. Being surrounded by unvaccinated people places everyone at risk; if those unvaccinated people are also taking no precautions—which is the typical picture across the country—then the risk is greater. Turns out we are our brothers' keepers whether we accept the responsibility or not.

On Friday, the FDA amended the emergency use authorization (EUA) for Moderna's vaccine to permit a booster five instead of six months after the initial series is completed; is in line with the scheduling for the other mRNA vaccine from Pfizer/BioNTech. The Moderna vaccine is still authorized only for those 18 and older, but now may be used as a booster just a little bit sooner.

Of course, there are always folks willing, even eager, to take advantage of tragedy to enrich themselves, and the current situation is no exception. The latest in the cavalcade of venality is the fake Covid-19 home test kit, a thing that is apparently readily available online. There is enough concern for the FDA to put some guidelines out. They have a website listing authorized home tests; it is available at <https://www.fda.gov/.../in-vitro-diagnostics-euas-antigen...> They've also issued a list of known fraudulent tests, available at <https://www.fda.gov/.../fraudulent-coronavirus-disease...> They also recommend you seek out reviews from expert sources and do a search for a seller along with the words "scam" or "complaint" before buying, one of the good uses to which we can put the Internet. They are recommending you use a credit card when you buy so that you can more easily challenge the charge if the kit turns out to be a fake. And they suggest you will also want to have a look at the expiration date; some sellers are unloading expired kits on the public. If you're going to go to the trouble of a test, best you get one that actually works, right?

So what about herd immunity? With these kinds of numbers, we should be able to get enough people protected for herd immunity, right? Even Israel's health officials are talking that way. So is that where we're going?

You may recall that herd immunity is, indeed, a real thing that can happen. How it works is that, when you have enough people immune to a pathogen, it has trouble finding enough new susceptible hosts among host contacts to establish a transmission pattern and the pathogen eventually dies out or at least becomes a far less common sort of thing. The number of people that need to be immune for herd immunity to develop depends on the pathogen: The more transmissible they are, the more people it takes. For this particular permutation of SARS-CoV-2, the estimates are we would need around 94 percent of us worldwide to be immune.

I read a discussion of the subject in Fortune magazine, drawing on the expertise of Dr. Luis Ostrosky, chief of infectious diseases with McGovern Medical School at the University of Texas Health Science Center, and Dr. Gregory Poland, head of the Mayo Clinic's Vaccine Research Group, that I'll summarize for you here. The short version is that Ostrosky thinks it's time to let go of this pipe dream. Here's why:

(1) If we ever achieved it, herd immunity wouldn't last long. It looks like our antibody responses to this virus fade with time, and it's the antibodies that prevent initial infection. So even if we could get 94 percent of us all immune at the same time, fact is the folks whose prior infection was longer ago are going to become susceptible again as time goes on and folks whose vaccination was old would also become susceptible again. So without vaccination, we'd have sort of a rolling slate of once-again susceptible people ready for a new round. Since not everyone is willing to be vaccinated, then there's going to be no way to maintain the herd immunity without those folks continuing to get infected periodically. That's no way to get a virus to die out.

(2) This virus keeps mutating. New variants are going to continue to pop up, and one or more of them may be immune escapes. When that happens, we're going to have a whole lot of susceptible folks running around getting sick as we did way back at the beginning of this thing. Poland mentions the example of influenza virus. We've been battling that one for over a century, and we still see cases and need to revaccinate people every year. This one is looking like it could be in that class.

(3) The human cost of getting 94 percent of our population immune when so many refuse vaccination

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will be enormous because the unvaccinated are going to attain their protection the hard (and dangerous) way—over and over again. We would need tens of millions of Americans to get sick pretty close together in time to yield herd immunity every time we started to fall below our 94 percent number. There would need to be much more illness, much more strain on our financial resources to care for all those sick people, much more economic strain as people miss work and the economy can't function normally, much more long-Covid and its drain on resources, and much, much more death. Even if the current surge infects more and ends later than we expect, it likely will not leave us with herd immunity. If we consider the disruption and illness and loss it is causing, I think we'd be hard-pressed—and highly irresponsible—to argue more of this would be a desirable thing so we can reach a transient herd immunity.

Bottom line: We need more people vaccinated worldwide. That will take enormous resources, but the alternative is to keep expending resources indefinitely every time there's another surge in cases. Ostrosky said, I see Omicron as our kind of final warning shot." He adds that if we don't do something "drastic and permanent," it will mutate further and produce an immune escape—a variant against which we have no protection, no effective therapeutics, and no tests that identify it. The "drastic" something he thinks we need to do is not news: more vaccination and more masking. He says we need a minimum of 60 to 70 percent of our population across all geographic regions, economic strata, ethnicities, genders, and ages to put a dent in this thing. If it's not fairly even through these groups, then we'll continue to have devastating outbreaks. Honestly, I have little, maybe no, hope of that happening. This might just mean what we have now is the way it's going to be, effectively forever.

The CDC dropped a NIH study on its website on Friday; this is not yet peer-reviewed. The research team was looking at effects of vaccination status on morbidity and mortality from Covid-19. Here are the findings, quoted directly from the CDC:

"Among 1,228,664 persons who completed primary vaccination during December 2020-October 2021, severe COVID-19-associated outcomes (0.015%) or death (0.0033%) were rare. Risk factors for severe outcomes included age ≥ 65 years, were immunosuppressed, and or had at least one of six other underlying conditions. All persons with severe outcomes had at least one risk factor; 78% of persons who died had at least four."

The NIH report also said, "2246 (18.0 per 10,000 vaccinated persons) developed COVID-19 and 189 (1.5 per 10,000) had a severe outcome, including 36 who died (0.3 deaths per 10,000). . . . Severe COVID-19 outcomes after primary vaccination are rare; however, vaccinated persons who are aged ≥ 65 , are immunosuppressed, or have other underlying conditions might be at increased risk." One more interesting finding is that there was no association found between race/ethnicity and severe outcomes in these vaccinated people. That means the large differences in outcome seen prior to the availability of vaccines appear to be washed out by vaccination. The authors mention that this suggests "that COVID-19 vaccines are important for helping to mitigate racial and ethnic disparities exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic." Good to know that works, but this makes it more important than ever to reach members of minority groups with vaccines.

I looked at a series of papers, most in preprint so not yet peer-reviewed, comparing cases with the Omicron variant to cases earlier in the pandemic. As we collect data, a picture is emerging that follows along the lines of what's been reported since late November when this variant burst onto the public scene.

We have preliminary evidence from a study done at Case Western Reserve University analyzing the three-day risks of emergency department visit, hospitalization, ICU admission, and mechanical ventilation in 577,938 first-time infected patients across the US between September 1 and December 24 of last year as the Omicron variant emerged. This work found statistically what doctors have been reporting anecdotally right along. It appears the risk of being hospitalized if you have Covid-19 has halved since the Omicron variant became dominant. Data scientist Ron Xu who led the study said, "The difference was huge. We didn't need to do any complicated statistics to see the difference." Once admitted, the risk of being admitted to the ICU was halved as well, and the chance of ending up on a ventilator fell by three-quarters. This fits well with what we've seen from UK and South African studies. So emergency rooms are swamped, but a smaller proportion of cases need admitting. There are some caveats to accompany

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this finding, mostly that outcomes still depend very much on the vaccination status of the patient, the patient's age and overall health, and the patient's economic situation. We'll note that old people are still on the hook for some increased risk.

Just so no one gets the wrong idea, we should hasten to mention that vaccines still have a large effect on outcomes. We are seeing that even vaccination without a booster is keeping people out of the hospital; at Yale New Haven Hospital, about 80 percent of patients are unvaccinated; among the vaccinated nearly everyone were not boosted. They had very few vaccinated-and-boosted patients admitted. Hard to argue with that. Also important is to note that when Covid-19 progresses to lung disease, it's mostly in the unvaccinated.

Here's a sobering study: A research group at the CDC took a look at records for almost 1.7 million pediatric cases of Covid-10 diagnosed between March 1, 2020, and February 26, 2021, and constructed a matched-samples study, matching for age, sex, and prior Covid-19 or other acute respiratory infection diagnosis to compare those with and without Covid-19 or acute respiratory infection and new diabetes diagnoses. They found that "diabetes incidence was significantly higher among those with COVID-19 than among those 1) without COVID-19 . . . and 2) with non-COVID-19 ARI [acute respiratory infections] in the prepandemic period." What this means is that children who have had Covid-19 are at significantly higher risk to develop Type 1 or Type 2 diabetes. We've already seen this in adults; this study extends that finding to children. There have been reports of increased diabetes incidence in Europe as well. What we don't know yet is whether this is a transient condition that resolves or something that becomes chronic and lifelong. (If you need brushing up, a matched-samples design is a particularly powerful research means for comparing two groups; we talked about this almost a year ago in my Update #368 posted February 25, 2021, at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/4472116936138011>.)

Another CDC study released Friday took a look at multisystem inflammatory syndrome of children (MIS-C), that uncommon but serious complication, and vaccination status. Studying cases in 24 hospitals in 20 states between July 1 and December 9, 2021, when Delta was the dominant variant, the researchers found that vaccination has an efficacy of 91 percent against MIS-C. Of 38 hospitalized patients 12 to 18 who needed ventilation, all were unvaccinated. Cases were 12 to 18 years old A matched samples design was employed here too, matching patients by site, age group, and date of hospitalization. There were 102 MIS-C patients in the study.

This is presenting much like the common cold—sniffles, sore throat, congestion. There may be a cough, but it's likely to be milder; fevers don't occur as frequently. Work from the UK early in Omicron's emergence listed the top symptoms as runny nose, headache, fatigue, sneezing, and sore throat. The incubation period is running shorter, generally around three days. Also loss of the senses of taste and smell are far less common. Most important, there are fewer patients with lower respiratory symptoms like shortness of breath. We've talked before (Updates #503 posted January 5 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/5503283033021391> and #496 posted December 18 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/5431513513531677>) about the fact that it appears this variant is not as successful at reaching and replicating in lung tissue as Delta; that fits with the clinical picture that is emerging. It is important to note too that there is still a wide constellation of other symptoms which may occur; we're just trying to nail down the most common ones here.

We've talked from time to time since fairly early in this pandemic about training dogs to sniff out Covid-19 in people. You can find those discussions in my Update #153 posted July 24, 2020, at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/3802390993110612>, Update #177 posted August 18, 2020, at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/3881511635198547> for an interesting side note on Parkinson's disease diagnosis, Update #213 posted September 23, 2020, at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/4004519329564443> for news of testing in Finland, and Update #467 posted September 15, 2021 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/5105243676158664> for news of a trial in the US.

Today's news is about the use of Covid-sniffing dogs in a Massachusetts school. Two dogs trained to detect the virus in humans are roaming the halls of schools in the Freetown-Lakeville Regional School

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District, looking for kids who are infected. In a study available in preprint (so not yet peer-reviewed) from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, the dogs were able to accurately identify cases 82 to 94 percent of the time, which is as good as or better than many of our lab tests. This development could put an entirely new complexion on things. We do not yet have definitive data on the dogs' detection abilities in various contexts, for example, we're not sure how they'll do in a densely-crowded setting or outdoors; but this is a start.

Speaking of animals, there's an outbreak of Covid-19 among the big cats at the Miller Park Zoo in Bloomington, Illinois. The first symptoms appeared on November 20 with just one cat who developed a cough. Since then, four cats have become ill, and this week it was reported that an 11-year-old snow leopard, Rilü, had pneumonia. The snow leopard died on Saturday. Snow leopard populations in the wild have been dwindling for years and are estimated at only 4000 to 6500 today, so any untimely demise is a matter for some concern. Fortunately, these deaths, while not rare, have not been frequent either. The exhibit has been closed to protect the animals and the public, although we have no instances of animal-to-human transmission so far in any location. None of the animals at this zoo has been vaccinated yet; the veterinary vaccines are very difficult to obtain.

And that's it for the first full week of the year. Be careful, and stay well. We'll talk in a few days.

Lady Tigers take wind out of Cyclones

Groton Area's girls basketball team had a 14-point rally to overcome a seven point deficit and post a 50-44 win over Clark-Willow Lake. The game was played Thursday in Clark.

The Cyclones took a 13-11 first quarter lead and the Tigers had a nine-point rally followed by a 14-point rally to take the lead for good in the third quarter. Groton Area led, 26-22, at halftime and 40-27 after three quarters of play. Clark/Willow Lake closed to within three, 42-39, with three minutes left in the game but the TIGers made six of eight free throws down the stretch to secure the win.

Gracie Traphagen led the Tigers with 16 points and nine rebounds while Allyssa Locke had 12, Brooke Gengerke eight, Alyssa Thaler six, Jaedyn Penning had two points and Kennedy Hansen and Aspen Johnson each had one point.

Groton Area made 16 of 48 field goals for 33 percent, 13 of 23 free throws for 56 percent, had 14 team fouls and eight turnovers.

The Cyclones made 15 of 39 field goals for 38 percent, nine of 16 free throws for 56 percent, had 21 team fouls and 11 turnovers.

Groton Area is now 6-5 on the season while Clark/Willow Lake goes to 2-7.

The game was broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by Groton Ford, Allied Climate Professionals with Kevin Nehls, Bary Keith at Harr Motors, Dacotah Bank and the John Sieh Agency.

Groton Area won the junior varsity game, 32-8. Jaedyn Penning led Groton Area with 11 points while Mia Crank and Brooklyn Hansen each had five, Faith Traphagen four, Kennedy Hansen, Talli Wright and Elizabeth Flihs each had two points and Jerica Locke added a free throw.

The junior varsity game was also broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM with an anonymous sponsor.

- Paul Kosel

Groton Robotics Pancake Feed

Sponsored by Groton Lions Club

Sunday, January 30, 2022

10:00am-1:00pm

Groton Community Center



Pancakes, Sausage, Coffee, Milk and Juice will be served!

Free will donation!

Proceeds will go to Groton Robotics.

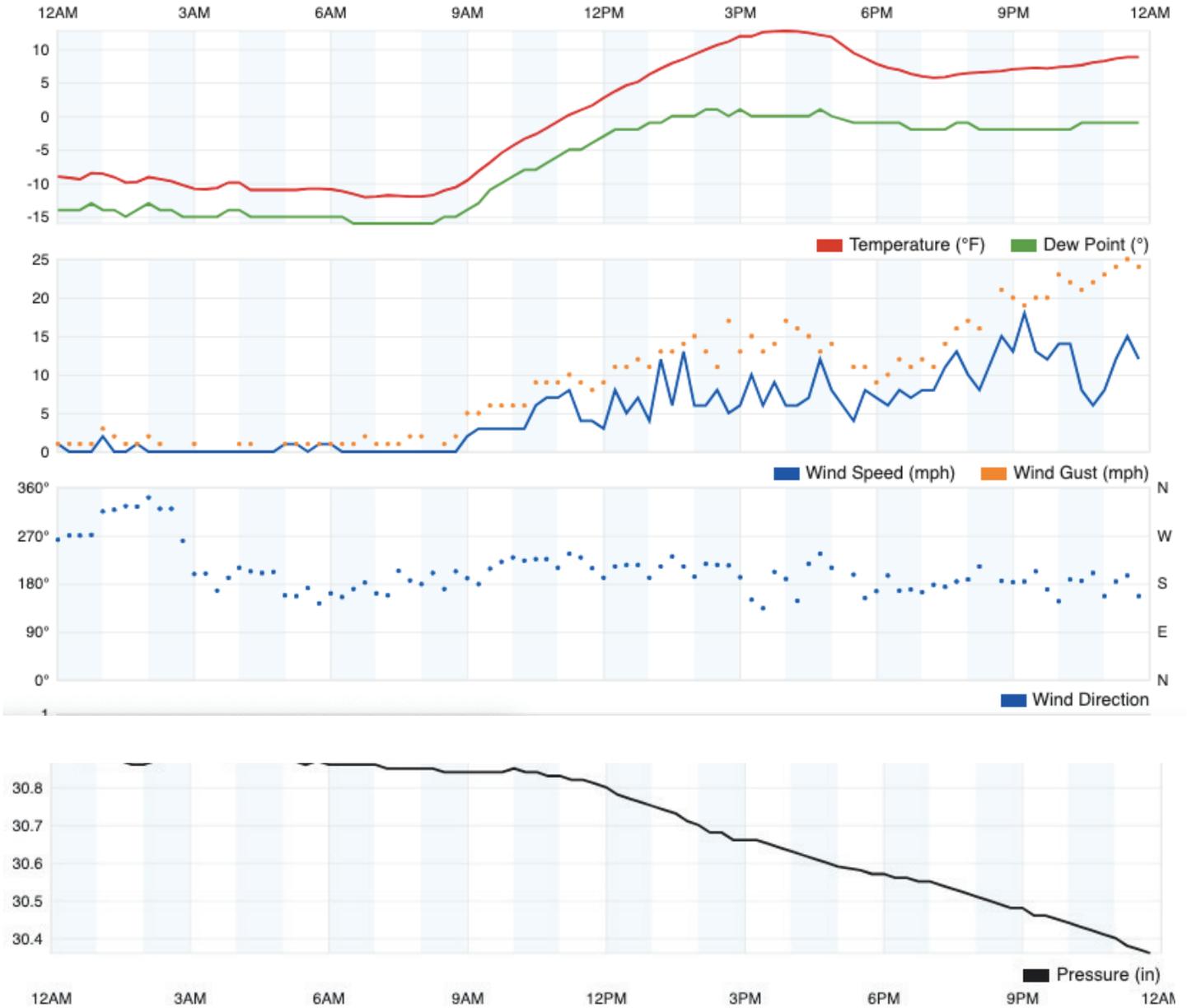


Carnival of Silver Skates performing at 2pm & 6:30pm!

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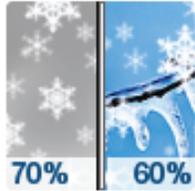
Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



Snow Likely and Breezy then Wintry Mix Likely

Tonight



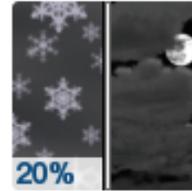
Slight Chance Snow and Blustery then Partly Cloudy

Saturday



Mostly Sunny then Chance Snow

Saturday Night



Slight Chance Snow then Mostly Cloudy

Sunday



Mostly Cloudy then Slight Chance Snow

Wintry Weather Today

Expected Snowfall - Official NWS Forecast
Valid Fri 12:00AM through Sat 12:00AM CST

Weather Forecast Office
Aberdeen, SD
Issued Jan 21, 2022 3:33 AM CST

What & When

- 1.) Light snow – though Central/Western SD could see some **freezing rain** mix in before temps warm above freezing
- 2.) Windy Across The Sisseton Hills This Morning.
- 3.) Windy Behind The Front Later This Afternoon.

Impacts

Slick roads where sufficient snow and ice accumulates.

www.weather.gov Updated: 1/21/2022 4:01 AM

Windy conditions for eastern South Dakota this morning, plus we have moisture moving in, which may result in a little ice for central and western South Dakota before temperatures warm above freezing. Elsewhere it will be light snow. Winds behind the front pick up from the northwest and temperatures drop tonight.

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Today in Weather History

January 21, 1999: Widespread dense fog and freezing drizzle created treacherous driving conditions across northeast South Dakota from the evening of the 21st to around noon on the 22nd. The freezing drizzle ended in the early morning hours of the 22nd. As a result, slippery conditions developed, especially across Hamlin, Deuel, and Codington counties. Many vehicles slid into the ditch. A few accidents resulted in minor injuries. Numerous activities were canceled on the evening of the 21st, and many schools had delayed starts on the 22nd.

1963: Up to 3" of snow falls on San Francisco, their heaviest since 1887.

1999: A major tornado outbreak occurred from the southwest into central and northeast Arkansas during the afternoon and evening. In the Little Rock Area, 30 tornadoes tracked across 15 counties. Homes and businesses were damaged or destroyed in Little Rock, Beebe, McRae, and areas farther north and east. Eight deaths resulted from the tornadoes, with 140 to 150 injuries also reported.

1863 - A severe coastal storm dropped heavy rain on the Fredericksburg area of Virginia. It disrupted a Union Army offensive in an ill famed "mud march." (David Ludlum)

1982 - The second of two major snowstorms to hit southern Minnesota came to an end. Minneapolis received 20 inches of snow in 24 hours to break the previous record of 17 inches in 24 hours established just a few days earlier. A record 38 inches of snow covered the ground following the two storms, with drifts ten feet high. (David Ludlum)

1985 - Three days of snow squalls at Buffalo NY finally came to an end. The squalls, induced by relatively warm water in Lake Erie, produced 34 inches of snow at the International Airport, with up to 47 inches reported in the suburbs of Buffalo. The New York "blizzard of '85" left many counties disaster areas. (19th-21st) (Weather Channel) (Storm Data) President Reagan was sworn in for a second term in the coldest Inauguration Ceremony of record. Cold and wind resulted in wind chill readings as much as 30 degrees below zero. (Sandra and TI Richard Sanders - 1987)

1987 - Low pressure over Minnesota produced high winds in the Northern Plains Region. Winds gusted to 66 mph at Rapid City SD, and reached 70 mph at Belle Fourche SD. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - High pressure over northern Nevada and low pressure off the coast of southern California combined to produce high winds in the southwestern U.S. Wind gusts in the San Francisco area reached 70 mph at Fremont. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Cold and snow prevailed in the northeastern U.S. Up to 13 inches of snow was reported between Woodford and Searsburg in Vermont. Montpelier VT reported a wind chill reading of 42 degrees below zero. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Unseasonably warm weather prevailed across the state of Florida. Eight cities reported record high temperatures for the date, including West Palm Beach with a reading of 86 degrees. Rain in southern New England changed to freezing rain, then to sleet, and then to heavy snow during the late morning. Most of Massachusetts was blanketed with 6 to 10 inches of snow. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

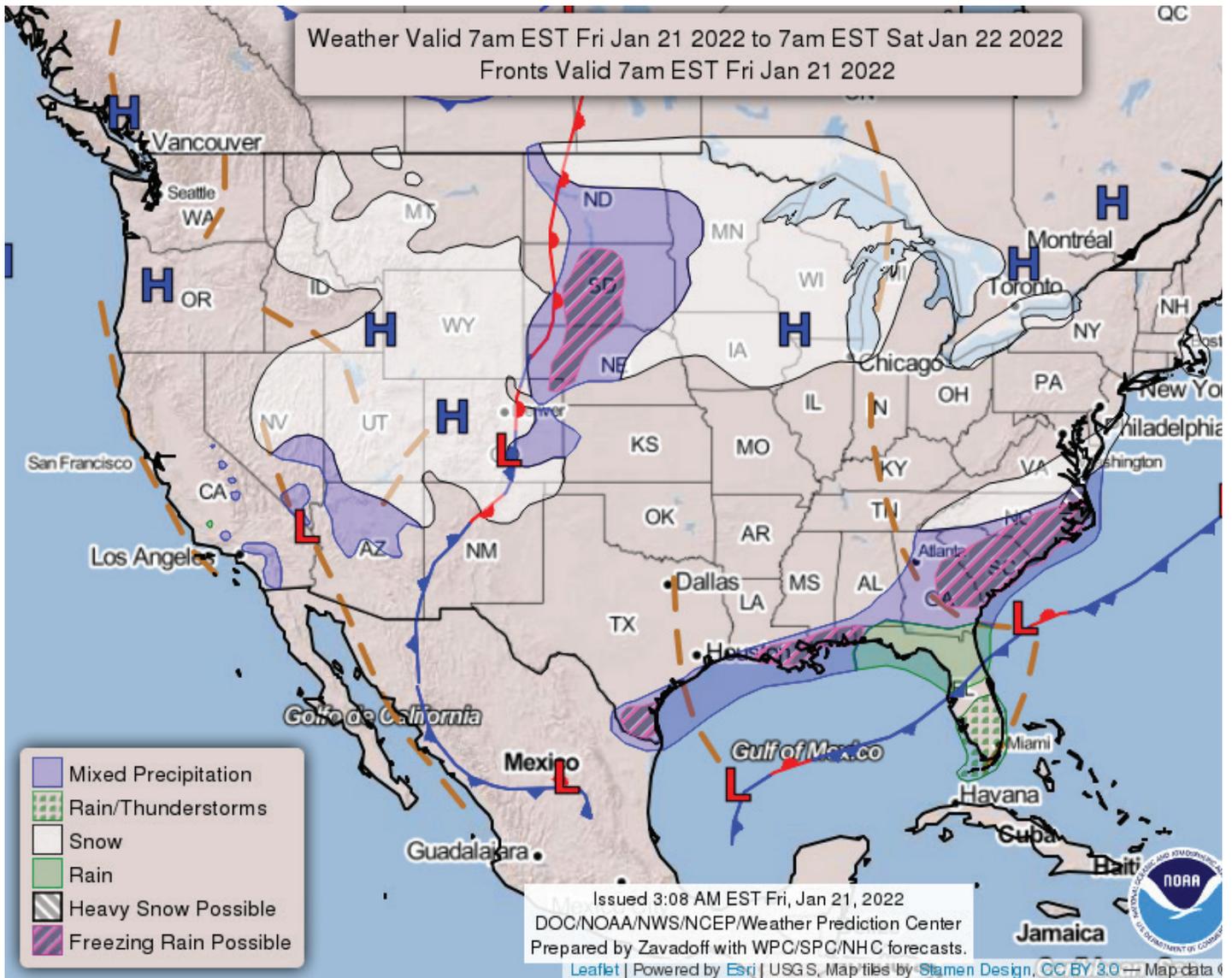
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 13 °F at 3:51 PM
Low Temp: -12 °F at 6:46 AM
Wind: 26 mph at 11:53 PM
Precip: 0.00

Record High: 57 in 1942
Record Low: -31 in 1949
Average High: 24°F
Average Low: 1°F
Average Precip in Jan.: 0.39
Precip to date in Jan.: 0.43
Average Precip to date: 0.39
Precip Year to Date: 0.43
Sunset Tonight: 5:25:13 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:01:28 AM



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ANXIOUS AND AFRAID

Walk through the waiting area in an emergency room and the "face of anxiety" becomes real. From a minor cut to a major wound, fear is obvious and real. Even people with a deep faith in God are often grasping for a sign of hope or a word of comfort.

Our Psalmist was familiar with feelings of both peace and anxiety. He knew the comfort of God's grace and had experienced His peace. However, he had an illness that took him to the very door of death. And beginning in verse one he walks us through his ordeal expressing his love for God and the greatness of His grace. He also presented a beautiful picture of God: He is a God who listens to our cries, responds with help, is gracious and righteous, filled with compassion, protects even the "simple-hearted" folk who are in need and saves them. All the characteristics that he uses to describe God, by the way, are ones that every Christian can develop and share with others.

At the end of his ordeal, he seems to catch his breath and reminds himself to: "Be at rest once more, O my soul, for the Lord has been good to you." It's as though he could not believe the goodness of God, His grace, or His power.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians about this. "...My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in (your) weakness." God's power to put our minds and heart at peace is a theme that runs through Scripture.

God spoke of this in Genesis: "Do not be afraid for I am with you..." And before Jesus returned to be with His Father, He promised that "I am with you always!"

Prayer: Lord, when we face situations that are beyond our control, assure us of Your presence, peace and power. Help us to rest in Your goodness. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: – Be at rest once more, O my soul, for the Lord has been good to you. Psalm 116:7

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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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News from the  Associated Press

Thursday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

Aberdeen Roncalli 63, Webster 25

Akron-Westfield, Iowa 55, Elk Point-Jefferson 46

Arlington 70, Lake Preston 29

Belle Fourche 60, Douglas 29

Bridgewater-Emery 47, Howard 45

Corsica/Stickney 76, Ethan 50

Crow Creek 57, Little Wound 48

DeSmet 48, Castlewood 45

Elkton-Lake Benton 62, Colman-Egan 38

Faulkton 54, Ipswich 27

Florence/Henry 44, Estelline/Hendricks 39, OT

Groton Area 50, Clark/Willow Lake 44

Irene-Wakonda 49, Alcester-Hudson 29

Marty Indian 68, Santee, Neb. 41

Miller 57, Chamberlain 48

Mobridge-Pollock 73, McLaughlin 21

Parkston 60, Bon Homme 45

Rapid City Christian 61, Hill City 57, OT

Sioux Falls Jefferson 63, Harrisburg 52

Sioux Falls O'Gorman 63, Sioux Falls Lincoln 40

Sioux Falls Roosevelt 47, Yankton 44

Tripp-Delmont/Armour 49, Mitchell Christian 35

Wall 55, Philip 43

Warner 55, Tiospa Zina Tribal 30

West Central 51, Lennox 15

White River 48, Gregory 47

281 Conference Tournament=

Championship=

Sanborn Central/Woonsocket 44, Wolsley-Wessington 31

Fifth Place=

Highmore-Harrold 42, Hitchcock-Tulare 34

Seventh Place=

Iroquois/Doland 45, Sunshine Bible Academy 27

Third Place=

James Valley Christian 38, Wessington Springs 31

LMC Tournament=

First Round=

Dupree 61, Lemmon 57

Harding County 52, McIntosh 7

Panhandle Conference Tournament=

Semifinal=

Sioux County, Neb. 56, Edgemont 33

POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=

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Britton-Hecla vs. Redfield, ppd.

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=

Aberdeen Christian 57, Waubay/Summit 50
Arlington 63, Lake Preston 33
Canton 69, Parker 65
Chamberlain 60, Miller 25
Dell Rapids 65, Madison 60, OT
Deuel 81, Sisseton 58
Elkton-Lake Benton 62, Colman-Egan 38
Ethan 55, Corsica/Stickney 45
Freeman 56, Menno 27
Gregory 64, Kimball/White Lake 29
Hanson 61, Canistota 60
Harding County 59, Hettinger/Scranton, N.D. 53
Herreid/Selby Area 65, North Central Co-Op 44
Howard 49, Bridgewater-Emery 42
Ipswich 44, Faulkton 32
Irene-Wakonda 54, Alcester-Hudson 37
Leola/Frederick 48, Northwestern 42
Little Wound 86, Crow Creek 42
Parkston 61, Bon Homme 40
Pierre 80, Douglas 41
Santee, Neb. 64, Marty Indian 56
Sioux Falls Christian 48, Vermillion 39
Sioux Valley 79, Deubrook 56
Tripp-Delmont/Armour 51, Mitchell Christian 37
West Central 66, Lennox 49
Winner 56, Tri-Valley 50
281 Conference Tournament=
Championship=
Wolsey-Wessington 55, Wessington Springs 29
Fifth Place=
Highmore-Harrold 47, Sanborn Central/Woonsocket 32
Seventh Place=
Iroquois/Doland 56, Sunshine Bible Academy 48
Third Place=
Hitchcock-Tulare 60, James Valley Christian 56
Panhandle Conference Tournament=
Semifinal=
Hemingford, Neb. 52, Edgemont 20
POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=
Britton-Hecla vs. Redfield, ppd.
McLaughlin vs. Mobridge-Pollock, ppd.

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

Arians leads South Dakota State past St. Thomas (MN) 92-77

ST. PAUL, Minn. (AP) — Alex Arians had a career-high 20 points as South Dakota State stretched its win

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streak to seven games, getting past St. Thomas (Minn.) 92-77 on Thursday night.

Baylor Scheierman had 15 points, 11 rebounds and eight assists for South Dakota State (16-4, 7-0 Summit League). Zeke Mayo also scored 15 points and Douglas Wilson had 14 points.

Ryan Lindberg had 18 points for the Tommies (8-9, 2-3). Anders Nelson added 13 points and Riley Miller had 12 points.

Felony for brokering unlicensed grain buyers clears Senate

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota Senate on Thursday unanimously passed a proposal to make it a felony for anyone who brokers a grain purchase with an unlicensed buyer.

The state requires grain buyers to have a license as part of a way to protect payments for farmers. Authorities have said there is an increase in brokers, who set up the transaction for a commission, and some of them have used unlicensed grain buyers.

"We do need to say that setting up an illegal deal ought to be illegal," Public Utilities Commissioner Chris Nelson told a committee considering the bill last week.

Officials considered requiring brokers to be licensed but settled on making it a class 5 felony as a deterrent. The maximum sentence would be five years in prison and a \$10,000 fine.

The bill will next head to the House.

Senate passes funding boost for private school scholarships

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota Senate on Thursday passed a \$1.5 million funding boost for a private school scholarship program that is funded through tax credits.

The bill's proponents argued the program allows low-income students to go to the school of their choice, including religious schools. But public education groups have opposed the program because it siphons funds from the state government for private education.

Republicans broadly supported the proposal, which would raise the tax credit's cap to \$3.5 million. It's the third time the cap has been raised.

"We ought to try and help as many families in South Dakota get as much education as they can," said Sen. Lee Schoenbeck, the bill's primary proponent, during a committee hearing this week.

But public school groups said the boost in funding was unnecessary and subsidized private schools.

"It's really a voucher program for private schools with little oversight and no accountability," said Mitch Richter, representing the United School Association of South Dakota.

The bill will next head to the House.

Bankers survey: Rural economy stays strong in 10 states

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — The economy in rural parts of 10 Plains and Western states remains strong, according to a new monthly survey of bankers in the region released Thursday, but those bankers said they have growing concerns about the rising costs associated with running farms.

The overall Rural Mainstreet economic index fell in January to 61.1 from December's 66.7. Any score above 50 suggests a growing economy, while a score below 50 suggests a shrinking economy.

"Solid grain prices, the Federal Reserve's record-low short-term interest rates, and growing agricultural exports have underpinned the Rural Mainstreet Economy," Creighton University economist Ernie Goss, who oversees the survey, said.

Bankers surveyed listed their top concern for farmers in 2022 as rising inflation that's driving up the prices of farm supplies, from fuel to fertilizer. Disruptions of the delivery of farm supplies ranked second among bankers' concerns, and rising interest rates ranked third.

"Inflation is a serious problem here," Jim Eckert, president of the Anchor State Bank in Anchor, Illinois, said for the report. "Gasoline prices have nearly doubled since November 2020."

Jim Brown, CEO of Hardin County Savings Bank in Eldora, Iowa, said that rising costs "have raised our

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average farmer break-even points," but that current commodity prices still have most farmers showing moderate gains.

Despite the concerns, bank CEOs are optimistic about the next six months. The survey's confidence index rose to 61.1 from December's 55.2.

Bankers from Colorado, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wyoming were surveyed.

Tourism has record-breaking year in South Dakota

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota had a record number of visitors in 2021, making it the first state to fully recover to pre-pandemic levels, according to the tourism officials.

The state Department of Tourism says visitors spent more than \$4.4 billion last year, generating \$160 million in tax revenue for the state and \$184 million for local governments.

"We have to remember that tourism is generating sales tax and other taxes that fund things like fire fighters and law enforcement and help with infrastructure," said Jim Hagen, South Dakota secretary of tourism. "It's an important part of our economy. Without those visitors, our economy would look really different."

Tourism also supports over 54,000 jobs across the state, according to a news release from the department.

South Dakota's visitor spending saw an increase of 30% from 2020, the Argus Leader reported. The amount spent per trip also increased from \$282 in 2020 to \$323 in 2021, according to tourism officials.

Hagen said research showed tourists were seeking vacations with wide open spaces, national parks, mountains and rural areas, making South Dakota a travel destination.

Hagen is optimistic tourism demand will continue through 2022. Market research shows people still want the same kind of vacation — mountains, rural spaces and national parks to explore. That won't change for another five to 10 years, Hagen added.

"We've sort of turned a corner with the American traveling public. They just want to get out and travel," Hagen said.

Japan widens virus restrictions as omicron surges in cities

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Restaurants and bars will close early in Tokyo and a dozen other areas across Japan beginning Friday as the country widens COVID-19 restrictions due to the omicron variant, which has caused cases to surge to new highs in metropolitan areas.

The restraint, which is something of a pre-state of emergency, is the first since September and is scheduled to last through Feb. 13. With three other prefectures — Okinawa, Hiroshima and Yamaguchi — under similar measures since early January, the state of restraint now covers 16 areas, or one-third of the country.

While many Japanese adults are fully vaccinated against COVID-19, few have gotten a booster shot, which has been a vital protection from the highly contagious omicron variant of the coronavirus.

The Health Ministry on Friday approved Pfizer vaccinations for children aged 5-11, who are increasingly vulnerable to infection.

Throughout the pandemic, Japan has resisted the use of lockdowns to limit the spread of the virus and has focused on requiring eateries to close early and not serve alcohol, and on urging the public to wear masks and practice social distancing, as the government seeks to minimize damage to the economy.

Under the latest measures, most eateries are asked to close by 8 or 9 p.m., while large events can allow full capacity if they have anti-virus plans. In Tokyo, certified eateries that stop serving alcohol can stay open until 9 p.m. while those serving alcohol must close an hour earlier.

Restaurants that close at 9 p.m. and don't serve alcohol receive 30,000 yen (\$263) per day in government compensation, while those that close at 8 p.m. get 25,000 yen (\$220) per day.

Critics say the measures, which almost exclusively target bars and restaurants, make little sense and are unfair.

Mitsuru Saga, the manager of a Japanese-style "izakaya" restaurant in downtown Tokyo, said he chose

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to serve alcohol and close at 8 p.m. despite receiving less compensation from the government.

"We cannot make business without serving alcohol," Saga said in an interview with Nippon Television. "It seems only eateries are targeted for restraints."

Some experts question the effectiveness of placing restraints only on eateries, noting that infections show no signs of slowing in the three prefectures that have already been subjected to the measures for nearly two weeks.

After more than two years of repeated restraints and social distancing requests, Japanese are increasingly becoming less cooperative to such measures. People are back to commuting on packed trains and shopping at crowded stores.

Tokyo's main train station of Shinagawa was packed as usual with commuters rushing to work Friday morning.

Japan briefly eased border controls in November but quickly reversed them to ban most foreign entrants when the omicron variant began spreading in other countries. Japan says it will stick to the stringent border policy through the end of February as the country tries to reinforce medical systems and treatment.

The tough border controls have triggered criticism from foreign students and scholars who say the measures are not scientific.

A group of scholars and Japan-U.S. experts recently launched a petition, led by Japan Society head Joshua Walker, calling on Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and his government to allow foreign scholars and students to enter the country again under careful preventive measures.

A letter to Kishida, signed by hundreds of academics and experts in Japan-U.S. studies, urged his government to relax border controls to allow educators, students and scholars to enter Japan and pursue their academic activity. Many of them have been forced to give up Japan studies and focus instead on other countries, including South Korea.

"They become the bridges between Japan and other societies. They are future policymakers, business leaders, and teachers. They are the foundation of the U.S.-Japan alliance and other international relationships that support Japan's core national interests," the letter said. "The closure is harming Japan's national interests and international relationships."

Japan recently announced it will allow 87 students on Japanese government scholarships to enter the country, but petitioners say there are many others on foreign government-sponsored scholarships who still cannot get in.

Tokyo logged 9,699 new confirmed cases Friday, exceeding the record 8,638 the day before.

Norio Ohmagari, director of the Disease Control and Prevention Center of National Center for Global Health and an advisor to the Tokyo metropolitan government panel, said Tokyo's daily cases may exceed 18,000 within a week if the increase continues at the current pace.

Though only some of the infected are hospitalized and occupying less than one-third of available beds in the capital, experts say the rapid spread of the virus could quickly overwhelm the medical system once the infections include the elderly.

Schools and other sectors in some areas have also become paralyzed.

The ministry has trimmed the required self-isolation period from 14 days to 10 for those who come into close contact with someone who tests positive for COVID-19, and to seven days for essential workers if they test negative.

While about 80% of Japanese have received their first two vaccine doses, the rollout of booster shots has been slow and has reached only 1.4 % of the population so far.

US, Russia far apart on Ukraine crisis as top diplomats meet

By MATTHEW LEE and JAMEY KEATEN Associated Press

GENEVA (AP) — The United States and Russia tried Friday to avert another devastating conflict in Europe, but the two powers' top diplomats warned no breakthrough was imminent as fears rise that Moscow is planning to invade Ukraine.

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Armed with seemingly intractable and diametrically opposed demands, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov met in Geneva at what the American said was a "critical moment." The talks are shaping up as a possible last-ditch effort at dialogue.

With an estimated 100,000 Russian troops massed near Ukraine, many fear Moscow is preparing an invasion although Russia denies that. The U.S. and its allies are scrambling to present a united front to prevent that or coordinate a tough response if they can't.

After the talks, Lavrov called them "constructive and useful" and said that the U.S. agreed to provide written responses to Russian demands on Ukraine and NATO next week. That could at least delay any imminent aggression for a few days.

But he declined to characterize that step.

"I can't say whether we are on the right path or not," he told reporters. "We will see when we get the American responses."

Ahead of the meeting, the two diplomats remained far apart.

"We don't expect to resolve our differences here today. But I do hope and expect that we can test whether the path of diplomacy or dialogue remains open," Blinken told Lavrov before their spoke privately. "This is a critical moment."

Lavrov, meanwhile, said he did not "expect a breakthrough at these negotiations either. What we expect is concrete answers to our concrete proposals."

Moscow has demanded that the NATO alliance promise that Ukraine — a former Soviet republic — will never be allowed to join. It also wants the allies to remove troops and military equipment from parts of eastern Europe. The U.S. and its NATO allies have flatly rejected those demands and say that Russian President Vladimir Putin knows they are nonstarters. They have said they're open to less dramatic moves.

Washington and its allies have repeatedly promised "severe" consequences such as biting economic sanctions — though not military action — against Russia if an invasion goes ahead.

Blinken repeated that warning Friday. He said the U.S. and its allies were committed to diplomacy, but also committed "if that proves impossible, and Russia decides to pursue aggression against Ukraine, to a united, swift and severe response."

But he said he also wanted to use the opportunity to share directly with Lavrov some "concrete ideas to address some of the concerns that you have raised, as well as the deep concerns that many of us have about Russia's actions."

Ukraine is already beset by conflict. Russia's Putin seized control of Ukraine's Crimea Peninsula in 2014 and backed a separatist insurgency in eastern Ukraine, part of a simmering but largely stalemated conflict with Ukrainian forces that has taken more than 14,000 lives. He faced limited international consequences for those moves, but the West says a new invasion would be different.

Ahead of his meeting with Lavrov, Blinken met Ukraine's president in Kyiv and top diplomats from Britain, France and Germany in Berlin this week.

Adding to its repeated verbal warnings to Russia, the United States stepped up sanctions on Thursday. The U.S. Treasury Department slapped new measures on four Ukrainian officials. Blinken said the four were at the center of a Kremlin effort begun in 2020 to damage Ukraine's ability to "independently function."

The Russian Foreign Ministry reaffirmed its demands Friday that NATO not expand into Ukraine, that no alliance weapons be deployed near Russian borders and that alliance forces pull back from Central and Eastern Europe.

The State Department, meanwhile, put out three statements — two on Russian "disinformation," including specifically on Ukraine, and another entitled "Taking Action to Expose and Disrupt Russia's Destabilization Campaign in Ukraine." The documents accused Russia and Putin of trying to reconstitute the former Soviet Union through intimidation and force.

The Russian foreign ministry mocked those statements, saying they must have been prepared by an Orwellian "Ministry of Truth," and Lavrov caustically dismissed them in his remarks to Blinken, saying he hoped the State Department had also spent time drafting responses to Russia's demands.

"I do hope that not everyone in the State Department was working on those materials and there were

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some who were working on the essence of our proposals and their substance," he said.

The Russian Foreign Ministry on Friday rejected Western claims that Moscow was trying to rebuild the Soviet empire and carve out its zone of influence in eastern Europe, charging that it's the West that thinks in categories of zones of influence.

Blinken took pains to stress U.S. unity with its allies in opposition to a possible Russian invasion, something that took an apparent hit earlier this week when U.S. President Joe Biden drew widespread criticism for saying retaliation for Russian aggression in Ukraine would depend on the details and that a "minor incursion" could prompt discord among Western allies.

On Thursday, Biden sought to clarify his comments by cautioning that any Russian troop movements across Ukraine's border would constitute an invasion and that Moscow would "pay a heavy price" for such an action.

"I've been absolutely clear with President Putin," Biden said. "He has no misunderstanding: Any, any assembled Russian units move across the Ukrainian border, that is an invasion."

Russia has denied it is planning an invasion and instead accused the West on Thursday of plotting "provocations" in Ukraine, citing the delivery of weapons to the country by British military transport planes in recent days.

'Minor incursion' by Russia could complicate West's response

By ROBERT BURNS, ELLEN KNICKMEYER and ANGELA CHARLTON Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Short of an all-out invasion, Russian President Vladimir Putin could take less dramatic action in Ukraine that would vastly complicate a U.S. and allied response. He might carry out what President Joe Biden called a "minor incursion" — perhaps a cyberattack — leaving the U.S. and Europe divided on the type and severity of economic sanctions to impose on Moscow and ways to increase support for Kyiv.

Biden drew widespread criticism for saying Wednesday that retaliating for Russian aggression in Ukraine would depend on the details. "It's one thing if it's a minor incursion and then we end up having a fight about what to do and not do," he said.

Biden and top administration officials worked Thursday to clean up his comments. Biden stressed that if "any assembled Russian units move across the Ukrainian border, that is an invasion" and it would be met with a "severe and coordinated economic response."

But even if the "minor incursion" remark was seen as a gaffe, it touched on a potentially problematic issue: While the U.S. and allies agree on a strong response to a Russian invasion, it's unclear how they would respond to Russian aggression that falls short of that, like a cyberattack or boosted support for pro-Russian separatists fighting in eastern Ukraine.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy was among those expressing concern about Biden's "minor incursion" remark.

"We want to remind the great powers that there are no minor incursions and small nations. Just as there are no minor casualties and little grief from the loss of loved ones," he tweeted.

Complaints came quickly that Biden had made clear to Putin where and how to drive a wedge between the U.S. and its European allies, by using only a portion of the large military force he has assembled near Ukraine's borders to take limited action. Russian officials have said they have no intention of invading Ukraine, but the deployment of a large combat force along its borders, estimated at 100,000 troops, has created fear of a crippling land war.

"Deeply troubling and dangerous," Rep. Liz Cheney, a Wyoming Republican and a crucial ally of Democrats on some issues, tweeted about Biden's remark.

"A greenlight for Putin," said Republican Rep. Mike Garcia of California, one of many to use that phrase.

Among the possibilities for limited Russian military action: Putin could move much of the Russian ground force away from the border but further bolster the separatists who control the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine. That conflict has killed more than 14,000 people in nearly eight years of fighting.

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Biden noted Thursday that "Russia has a long history of using measures other than overt military action to carry out aggression — paramilitary tactics, so-called gray zone attacks and actions by Russian soldiers not wearing Russian uniforms."

European allies largely have been united with the United States in demanding that Putin not move farther into Ukrainian territory and promising a tough response if he does. But the allies appear not to have united on what political and financial penalties to enact, or even what would trigger a response.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said "any kind of incursion into Ukraine on any scale whatever" would be a disaster for Russia and for the world, but he didn't specify a Western response. Likewise, his defense minister, Ben Wallace, told Parliament, "There is a package of international sanctions ready to go that will make sure that the Russian government is punished if it crosses the line," but he didn't define that line, other than warning against "any destabilizing action" by Russia in Ukraine.

Asked Thursday about Biden's comment on a "minor incursion," a French diplomat insisted it didn't prompt any rethinking of the "European consensus" that any new attack on Ukrainian sovereignty would have "massive and severe consequences." But the diplomat, commenting after meeting with Secretary of State Antony Blinken as he conferred with European counterparts on the Ukraine crisis, wouldn't elaborate on those consequences or what would constitute such an attack.

The official spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss his government's take.

Putin faced limited international consequences after he seized control of Ukraine's Crimea Peninsula in 2014 and backed the separatist insurgency in eastern Ukraine. His central demand to the West is that NATO provide a guarantee that Ukraine never be allowed to join the alliance — a demand that Washington and its allies have roundly rejected.

Biden on Wednesday noted that coordinating a sanctions strategy is further complicated by the fact that penalties aimed at crippling Russian banking would also have a negative effect on the economies of the United States and Europe.

"And so, I got to make sure everybody is on the same page as we move along," he said.

Democratic Sen. Jeanne Shaheen of New Hampshire, a senior member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and one of the leaders of a bipartisan congressional delegation that visited Ukraine last weekend, said she had seen no signs of a rift with the Europeans over how far Russia would have to go to trigger a response.

In an analysis of the Ukraine crisis, Seth Jones, a political scientist, and Philip Wasielewski, a former CIA paramilitary officer, cited several possible scenarios short of an all-out Russian invasion. This could include Putin sending conventional troops into the Donbas breakaway regions of Donetsk and Luhansk as "peacekeepers" and refusing to withdraw them until peace talks end successfully, they wrote in their analysis last week for the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

"All other options bring major international sanctions and economic hardship and would be counterproductive to the goal of weakening NATO or decoupling the United States from its commitments to European security," they wrote.

Among those other options: seizing Ukrainian territory as far west as the Dnieper River, which runs south through Kyiv to the Black Sea near the Crimean Peninsula. Putin might seek to use this as a bargaining chip or incorporate this territory fully into the Russian Federation, Jones and Wasielewski wrote.

Meat Loaf, 'Bat Out of Hell' rock superstar, dies at 74

By HILLEL ITALIE AP National Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Meat Loaf, the heavyweight rock superstar loved by millions for his "Bat Out of Hell" album and for such theatrical, dark-hearted anthems as "Paradise By the Dashboard Light," "Two Out of Three Ain't Bad," and "I'd Do Anything for Love (But I Won't Do That)," has died. He was 74.

The singer born Marvin Lee Aday died Thursday, according to a family statement provided by his long-time agent Michael Greene.

"Our hearts are broken to announce that the incomparable Meat Loaf passed away tonight," the state-

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ment said. "We know how much he meant to so many of you and we truly appreciate all of the love and support as we move through this time of grief in losing such an inspiring artist and beautiful man... From his heart to your souls...don't ever stop rocking!"

No cause or other details were given, but Aday had numerous health scares over the years.

"Bat Out of Hell," his mega-selling collaboration with songwriter Jim Steinman and producer Todd Rundgren, came out in 1977 and made him one of the most recognizable performers in rock. Fans fell hard for the roaring vocals of the long-haired, 250-plus pound singer and for the comic non-romance of the title track, "You Took The Words Right Out of My Mouth," "Two Out of Three Ain't Bad" and "Paradise By the Dashboard Light," an operatic cautionary tale about going all the way. "Paradise" was a duet with Ellen Foley that featured play by play from New York Yankees broadcaster Phil Rizzuto, who alleged — to much skepticism — that he was unaware of any alternate meanings to reaching third base and heading for home.

After a slow start and mixed reviews, "Bat Out of Hell" became one of the top-selling albums in history, with worldwide sales of more than 40 million copies. Meat Loaf wasn't a consistent hit maker, especially after falling out for years with Steinman. But he maintained close ties with his fans through his manic live shows, social media and his many television, radio and film appearances, including "Fight Club" and cameos on "Glee" and "South Park."

Friends and fans reacted to the death on social media.

"I hope paradise is as you remember it from the dashboard light, Meat Loaf," actor Stephen Fry said on Twitter.

Meat Loaf's biggest musical success after "Bat Out of Hell" was "Bat Out of Hell II: Back into Hell," a 1993 reunion with Steinman that sold more than 15 million copies and featured the Grammy-winning single "I'd Do Anything for Love (But I Won't Do That)."

Steinman died in April.

Aday's other albums included "Bat Out of Hell III: The Monster is Loose," "Hell in a Handbasket" and "Braver Than We Are."

A native of Dallas, Aday was the son of a school teacher who raised him on her own after divorcing his alcoholic father, a police officer. Aday was singing and acting in high school (Mick Jagger was an early favorite, so was Ethel Merman) and attended Lubbock Christian College and what is now the University of North Texas. Among his more notable childhood memories: Seeing John F. Kennedy arrive at Love Field in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963, then learning the president had been assassinated and driving to Parkland Hospital and watching a bloodied Jackie Kennedy step out of a car.

He was still a teenager when his mother died and when he acquired the nickname Meat Loaf, the alleged origins of which range from his weight to a favorite recipe of his mother's. He left for Los Angeles after college and was soon fronting the band Meat Loaf Soul. For years, he alternated between music and the stage, recording briefly for Motown, opening for such acts as the Who and the Grateful Dead and appearing in the Broadway production of "Hair."

By the mid-1970s, he was playing the lobotomized biker Eddie in the theater and film versions of "The Rocky Horror Picture Show," had served as an understudy for his friend John Belushi for the stage production of National Lampoon and had begun working with Steinman on "Bat Out of Hell." The dense, pounding production was openly influenced by Wagner, Phil Spector and Bruce Springsteen, whose bandmates Roy Bittan and Max Weinberg played on the record. Rundgren initially thought of the album as a parody of Springsteen's grandiose style.

Steinman had known Meat Loaf since the singer appeared in his 1973 musical "More Than You Deserve" and some of the songs on "Bat Out of Hell," including "All Revved Up With No Place to Go," were initially written for a planned stage show based on the story of Peter Pan. "Bat Out of Hell" took more than two years to find a taker as numerous record executives turned it down, including RCA's Clive Davis, who disparaged Steinman's songs and acknowledged that he had misjudged the singer: "The songs were coming over as very theatrical, and Meat Loaf, despite a powerful voice, just didn't look like a star," Davis wrote in his memoir, "The Soundtrack of My Life."

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With the help of another Springsteen sideman, Steve Van Zandt, "Bat Out of Hell" was acquired by Cleveland International, a subsidiary of Epic Records. The album made little impact until months after its release, when a concert video of the title track was aired on the British program the Old Grey Whistle Test. In the U.S., his connection to "Rocky Horror" helped when he convinced producer Lou Adler to use a video for "Paradise By the Dashboard Light" as a trailer for the cult movie. But Meat Loaf was so little known at first that he began his "Bat Out of Hell" tour in Chicago as the opening act for Cheap Trick, then one of the world's hottest groups.

"I remember pulling up at the theater and it says, 'TONIGHT: CHEAP TRICK, WITH MEAT LOAF.' And I said to myself, 'These people think we're serving dinner,'" Meat Loaf explained in 2013 on the syndicated radio show "In the Studio."

"And we walk out on stage and these people were such Cheap Trick fans they booed us from the start. They were getting up and giving us the finger. The first six rows stood up and screamed. ... When we finished, most of the boos had stopped and we were almost getting applause."

He is survived by Deborah Gillespie, his wife since 2007, and by daughters Pearl and Amanda Aday.

Biden-Kishida talks to touch on North Korea, China

By AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. President Joe Biden and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida will hold their first formal talks on Friday as the two leaders face fresh concerns about North Korea's nuclear program and China's growing military assertiveness.

The virtual meeting comes after North Korea earlier this week suggested it might resume nuclear and long-range missile testing that has been paused for more than three years.

North Korea's Kim Jong Un on Thursday presided over a Politburo meeting of the ruling Workers' Party where officials set policy goals for "immediately bolstering" military capabilities to counter what were described as the Americans' "hostile moves," according to the Korean Central News Agency.

Both the U.S. and Japan are also concerned about China's increasing aggression toward Taiwan. China claims self-governing Taiwan as its own territory, to be annexed by force if necessary. In recent months, it has stepped up military exercises near the island, frequently sending warplanes near Taiwan's airspace.

Japan remains concerned about China intentions in the South China Sea, where it has stepped up its military presence in recent years, and the East China Sea, where there is a long-running dispute about a group of uninhabited islets administered by Tokyo but claimed by Beijing.

White House officials said the two leaders were also expected to discuss ongoing efforts in the COVID-19 pandemic and the brewing crisis in eastern Europe, where Russia has massed some 100,000 troops near its border with Ukraine. Biden earlier this week said he believed Russian President Vladimir Putin is likely to order a further invasion of Ukrainian territory but he did not think Putin wanted an all-out war.

Japanese officials said Kishida, who is from Hiroshima, on which the U.S. dropped an atomic bomb at the end of the World War II, is eager to discuss a "world without nuclear weapons" during the summit.

Biden and top aides have sought to rally the support of NATO partners and other allies to respond with harsh sanctions against Russia if it moves forward with military action.

On Thursday, in preparation for the leaders' call, Biden's national security adviser Jake Sullivan and his Japanese counterpart, Takeo Akiba, held their own call to discuss North Korea, China and "the importance of solidarity in signaling to Moscow the strong, united response that would result from any attack" on Ukraine, according to the White House.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin also held virtual talks earlier this month with Japanese Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi and Defense Minister Nobuo Kishi, where China's military maneuvering and North Korea's nuclear program were discussed.

Friday's virtual meeting will be the first substantial exchange between the leaders since Kishida took office in October. The leaders had a brief conversation on the sidelines of a climate summit in Glasgow in November. Biden was the first leader to call Kishida, on the morning of his first full day in office.

Biden, who has sought to put greater focus on the Indo-Pacific amid China's rise as a world power, had built a warm relationship with Japan's last prime minister, Yoshihide Suga, and is hoping to build a similar rapport with Kishida.

In kids' book, Sotomayor asks: Whom have you helped today?

By JESSICA GRESKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — "Whom have I helped today?" That's the question Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor tells kids she asks herself every night before she goes to sleep.

Her new children's book, "Just Help! How to Build a Better World," challenges kids to ask how they will help, too. The book comes out Tuesday and is Sotomayor's third book for young readers.

In the book, children help in a variety of ways: sending care packages to American soldiers overseas, recycling plastic bags, cleaning up a park, donating toys to a children's hospital and encouraging others to vote.

"I want kids to do this intentionally, to think that this is a requirement of living almost, that trying to figure out how they will make a better world should be a part of the charge of their living," said Sotomayor, 67, in a telephone interview ahead of the book's publication.

Sotomayor said she wants kids not only to help family and friends but also to "think about how to help neighbors and how to help our community, and that it takes active thought and active action to change the world."

The story starts with Sotomayor as a child being asked by her mother how she will help that day and follows her and other kids as they find ways to assist. Sotomayor tells readers that she remembers throughout her childhood seeing her mother helping others, both as a nurse and in the community where she lived in the Bronx.

Sotomayor's mom, Celina Baez Sotomayor, died last year and is the inspiration for Sotomayor's next book, tentatively titled "Just Shine," she said. The book will talk about how her mother "let others shine," Sotomayor said. "That's how she approached the world."

Sotomayor said losing her mother has been "a difficult blow," but "being able to speak about how she inspired my life of service" seemed to be "a wonderful way to pay her tribute." There's a subtle tribute in her new book, too. An older man named John who encourages kids to vote is her nod to the late John Lewis, whom Sotomayor said she "greatly admired."

Sotomayor's other books include "Turning Pages: My Life Story" and "Just Ask! Be Different, Be Brave, Be You," about children with challenges including autism, dyslexia and Down syndrome. All the books by the court's first Latina justice have also been published in Spanish.

Sotomayor's last book, "Just Ask," grew out of her experience living with diabetes, which she was diagnosed with as a child. It's a topic that's newly relevant for many young people. A recent Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report found that children who had COVID-19 were more than twice as likely to be diagnosed with diabetes as those who had not had the virus.

Sotomayor says her message to newly diagnosed children is that the experience of having a chronic disease can make them stronger.

"Any condition in life can be viewed as either a burden or it can be viewed as an opportunity to grow. Because when you face life challenges, whether it's a condition like diabetes or it's any other condition that might be an illness, you have to learn how to be more resourceful and more disciplined about taking care of yourself and about maintaining your health," she said.

Sotomayor says living with diabetes has taught her to take care of and listen to her body. This month, as coronavirus cases have soared, she participated in arguments at the high court remotely, from her office. Her colleagues, with the exception of Justice Neil Gorsuch, wore masks in the courtroom for the first time since the justices returned to hearing in-person arguments in October. That prompted stories alleging Sotomayor didn't want to sit near anyone who was unmasked. Sotomayor and Gorsuch released a statement Wednesday noting that while they "sometimes disagree about the law" they are "warm col-

leagues and friends.”

In talking about her book, Sotomayor declined to discuss her decision to participate remotely in arguments, saying only, “I pay attention to my health.”

The ongoing pandemic means Sotomayor will be making virtual appearances in connection with her new book, including one hosted by the Chicago Public Library and another where she’ll talk with actress America Ferrera. On previous book tours, she often took pictures with kids and dispensed hugs. Sotomayor said she has continued to meet with schoolchildren virtually during the pandemic but acknowledged it’s “not as personally satisfying as getting hugs from kids.”

China mandates 3-day Olympic torch relay amid virus concerns

BEIJING (AP) — China is limiting the torch relay for the Winter Olympics to only three days amid coronavirus worries, organizers said Friday.

The flame will be displayed only in enclosed venues that are deemed “safe and controllable,” according to officials.

No public transit routes would be disturbed and normal life would continue for the 20 million residents of the capital, where a handful of new COVID-19 cases have been recorded over recent days.

Beijing’s deputy sports director, Yang Haibin, said safety was the “top priority,” with the pandemic, venue preparations and the possibility of forest fires in Beijing’s cold, dry climate all factored in.

The relay will run from Feb. 2-4, taking in the three competition areas of downtown Beijing, the suburb of Yanqing, and Zhangjiakou in the neighboring province of Hebei.

The Games have already been impacted on a scale similar to that experienced by Tokyo during last year’s Summer Olympics.

China says only selected spectators will be allowed to attend the events, and Olympic athletes, officials, staff and journalists are required to stay within a bubble that keeps them from contact with the general public.

The opening of the Games comes just days after the start of the Lunar New Year holiday, China’s biggest annual celebration when millions traditionally travel to their hometowns for family reunions. For the second year, the government has advised those living away from home to stay put, and train and plane travel has been curtailed.

Participants in the torch rally will undergo health screens and be carefully monitored, starting from two weeks before the event begins, said Xu Zhijun, deputy head of the organizing committee.

Beijing reported its first local omicron infection on Jan. 15, and 11 cases had been confirmed in the capital as of Thursday afternoon, the official Xinhua News Agency reported.

Outside of Beijing, several million people remain under lockdown as part of China’s “zero-tolerance” approach to dealing with the pandemic that has been credited with preventing outbreaks on the scale of the U.S. and other countries.

Numbers of new cases have dropped substantially in recent days amid strict adherence to masking, travel restrictions and school closures, along with a vaccination rate that now tops 85%. Some medical experts worry a lack of exposure to the virus could harm the Chinese population’s ability to deal with future waves of infection.

The scaled-down torch relay is a far cry from 2008, when Beijing sent the Olympic icon on a global journey ahead of its hosting of that year’s Summer Games. The relay drew protesters against China’s human rights violations and policies in Tibet, Xinjiang and elsewhere, leading to violent confrontations and the cancellation of some overseas stages.

The Winter Games have been beset by similar political controversies, alongside medical considerations.

Six weeks ago, the United States, Britain and several allies said they would not send dignitaries to attend the Games as a protest against human rights abuses by the Communist Party regime.

Athletes have been threatened by the organizing committee with “certain punishments” for saying or doing anything that would offend their Chinese hosts, while several delegations urged anyone headed

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to Beijing to take "burner" phones instead of their personal devices because of concerns their personal information could be compromised.

The National Hockey League cited uncertainty caused by the pandemic to hold back all of its players from the Olympic tournament.

And earlier this week, American broadcaster NBC said it won't be sending announcing teams to China, citing the same virus concerns raised when the network pulled most of its broadcasters from the Tokyo Games.

Resort guests raise money as world rallies to help Tonga

By NICK PERRY Associated Press

WELLINGTON, New Zealand (AP) — The tranquil resort in Tonga sat behind a lagoon and reef break that was perfect for snorkelers and surfers alike. Guests who had never met before would sit together to eat delicious communal meals cooked by owner Moana Paea and her staff, or relax in rustic cabins tucked in the trees.

Then came the massive volcanic eruption and tsunami, which killed at least three people and left dozens more homeless. The waves swallowed up the Ha'atafu Beach Resort.

"It's completely bare land. Coupled with the black ash from the volcano, it looks like a bomb site," said Paea's brother Alan Burling after viewing images online.

But now, dozens of former guests from New Zealand, Australia, the U.S. and elsewhere are raising money to help Paea and her husband Hola start again.

It's just one of the ways the world is rallying to help the people of the remote Pacific island nation rebuild. Governments from New Zealand, Australia, Japan, Britain, China and elsewhere have been sending fresh water and other much-needed supplies on military ships and transport planes.

Pita Taufatofua, who became a sensation as Tonga's bare-chested Olympic Games flag bearer, has started an online fundraising page to rebuild schools and hospitals that is already more than halfway to its goal of raising 1 million Australian dollars (\$720,000).

Tonga never had the luxury resorts of other Pacific destinations like Fiji or Tahiti, and tourists came expecting a more down-to-earth experience. At the Ha'atafu Beach Resort, the pandemic had already halted international tourism, and so the owners had pivoted to their renowned cooking.

New Zealand's acting high commissioner in Tonga, Peter Lund, was picking up some catering there on Saturday when the volcano erupted. Speaking by satellite phone from Tonga on Friday, he described what happened.

"It's all a bit of a daze now, but I certainly heard this incredible thunderclap," Lund said. He said the resort staff told him it was too dangerous to stay and so he returned to his car.

"The waves were coming in. I got back onto the main road," Lund said. "And gradually the skies turned black and the volcanic ash started raining down."

Lund's 30-minute drive back to the high commission in the capital, Nuku'alofa, turned into 90 minutes. Because the compound was built on higher ground, Tongans rushed to safety there and that night Lund had about 80 people stay.

Back at the beach resort, Moana Paea, her family and the others there had no time to save any of their belongings and ended up climbing a tree to survive, said Burling, who lives in New Zealand.

"Like everyone else, she was very upset and very emotional," he said after managing to speak to his sister briefly by phone.

He said he hadn't yet told her about the online fundraising page he started, which has already exceeded its goal of 100,000 New Zealand dollars (\$67,000).

"Moana, she doesn't really like the fuss, and probably wouldn't have wanted us to raise the money," Burling said. "But she would have literally lost everything, and they have staff to support."

He said the resort had about 14 cabins, or fale, and could house 30 or 40 guests. It's too early to know whether they will rebuild. One worry is that the volcano could erupt again. The first priority, Burling said,

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is to send his sister a big box of clothes and other basic supplies.

People who have been donating money have been leaving messages online.

"Lovely memories of two wonderful family holidays at Ha'atafu with truly beautiful people," wrote one couple. "We are so saddened to hear of the devastation but incredibly glad to hear everyone is safe."

Elsewhere on the main island of Tongatapu, people are beginning the task of cleaning up. U.N. humanitarian officials report that about 84,000 people — 80% of Tonga's population — have been impacted by the volcano's eruption.

The tsunami severed the single fiber-optic cable that connects Tonga to the rest of the world, leaving many unable to connect with loved ones abroad to let them know they were okay.

At the Tonga Red Cross Society, Secretary General Sione Taumoefolau said they had two satellite phones, and families were invited to come in and use them. They were allocated three minutes each to speak with relatives abroad.

"Everyone was crying, it was very emotional," Taumoefolau said. "We've done 300 calls in just the last two days."

Some patchy phone service is slowly returning thanks to satellite links but the internet remains down.

"Everyone misses the internet, they're going crazy for the internet," Taumoefolau said.

The internet outage was stopping people from connecting with each other and meant many were unable to work.

People have been busy cleaning the ash from their homes. They usually rely on rainwater to drink, but with it tainted by ash Taumoefolau said the Red Cross was handing out cans of water or encouraging people to use the city supply.

He said they needed a big rainfall to wash away the ash, but it has been dry since the eruption of the Hunga Tonga Hunga Ha'apai volcano.

A New Zealand navy ship arrived in Tonga on Friday carrying 250,000 liters (66,000 gallons) of water and with a desalination plant that can produce tens of thousands of liters of fresh water each day.

Another ship left Australia with supplies, while Britain was diverting a Royal Navy ship. Japan had sent military planes and a ship was on the way.

"People are still coming to terms with everything. People I think are a lot calmer now than they would have been a few days ago," said Lund, the acting high commissioner. "The fact that the volcano has kept quiet I think has helped people feel a bit less anxious."

The gradual restoration of communications was helping, he said, as was the fact that Tongan officials were able to reach some of the hard-hit outer islands and evacuate or check in with residents there.

"So," Lund said, "progress."

Has rule-breaker Boris Johnson met his match in 'partygate'?

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — For Boris Johnson, facts have always been flexible.

The British prime minister's career is littered with doctored quotes, tall tales, exaggerations and mistruths. When called out, he has generally offered an apologetic shrug or a guilty grin, and moved on. Plenty of people were willing to forgive him.

At least until now. Revelations that the prime minister and his staff partied while Britain was under coronavirus restrictions have provoked public outrage and prompted many in the Conservative Party to consider dumping their leader.

The Conservatives picked Johnson because his image as a cheerful rule-breaker — the naughty schoolboy of British politics — gave him a rare ability to connect with voters. Now, many are having second thoughts.

"His fans would say he's a force of nature — he doesn't let things get in his way," said Steven Fielding, professor of political history at the University of Nottingham.

"Sometimes he's been caught out, but mostly he's got away with it," Fielding added. "Now the reality is becoming more apparent to more and more people."

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Johnson has often been able to talk his way out of crises. The Oxford-educated politician has used words to create the image of a ruffled jokester with a mop of blond hair who doesn't take himself too seriously. Quips and jokes tumble out of him, sometimes in Latin or ancient Greek.

That persona made Johnson a popular guest on the humorous TV show "Have I Got News for You" from the late 1990s onwards, and brought him global fame as London's boosterish mayor between 2008 and 2016.

Many people thought he was too lightweight ever to become prime minister, and Johnson didn't contradict them. He disguised his ambition with jokes, saying he had as much chance of becoming prime minister as of "finding Elvis on Mars" or being "reincarnated as an olive."

In fact, he had long dreamed of power. His sister Rachel Johnson has said his childhood ambition was to be "world king." But his route to the top was haphazard.

As a young journalist at The Times of London, he fabricated a quote about King Edward II from a historian, who also happened to be his godfather. He was fired, but that didn't stop him becoming Brussels correspondent for the Daily Telegraph in the early 1990s, filing exaggerated stories of EU waste and red tape. Those "Euromyths" about one-size-fits-all condoms and plans to ban "bendy bananas" helped turn British opinion against the bloc, and ultimately lead to Johnson becoming the Brexit champion who would years later bring the U.K. out of the EU.

Brexit was won in a 2016 referendum campaign that contained many questionable claims, notably the allegation — often repeated by Johnson — that Britain gave the EU 350 million pounds a week that could instead be spent on the U.K.'s health service.

Johnson suffered an early political setback when then-Conservative leader Michael Howard fired him in 2004 for lying about an extramarital affair. A month earlier, Howard forced him to apologize to the city of Liverpool for accusing its residents of "wallowing" in victimhood.

Opponents long argued that Johnson's loose grasp of facts — and history of glibly offensive comments — made him unfit for high office. Over the years Johnson has called Papua New Guineans cannibals, claimed that "part Kenyan" Barack Obama had an ancestral dislike of Britain and compared Muslim women who wear face-covering veils to "letter boxes."

Johnson has usually responded by dismissing offensive comments as jokes, or by accusing journalists of dredging up long-ago remarks. Attacking the media — along with "lefty London lawyers" — is a long-standing populist tactic of Johnson. His biographer Andrew Gimson has called him the "Merry England PM" who depicts his opponents as joyless puritans.

Now, though, Johnson's allies worry that the tide has turned. Johnson has apologized for the lockdown-breaching parties in uncharacteristically subdued and carefully worded statements. He has stopped short of admitting personal wrongdoing, saying he believed he acted within the rules.

But many Britons who stuck to lockdown rules imposed by the government — cut off from friends and family, unable to visit relatives in nursing homes and hospitals — have scoffed at Johnson's "partygate" excuses, including his claim that he thought a "bring your own booze" garden party was a work event.

Chris Curtis, head of political polling at Opinium Research, said public trust in the prime minister had plummeted and Johnson's personal approval ratings were now "pretty dire."

"It has always been true that the public would prefer to have a pint with Boris Johnson but wouldn't necessarily trust him to look after their kids," Curtis said. "But what we've seen happen with this crisis is that now people say they would be less keen to have a pint with him — and people really wouldn't trust him to look after their kids."

Next week, senior civil servant Sue Gray is expected to conclude an investigation into the partying allegations. If she does not find that Johnson knowingly broke the rules, Conservative lawmakers may hold back from a no-confidence vote to topple him.

But Fielding said Johnson's brand has now been irrevocably tarnished, even if the immediate crisis passes.

"It will recede, but I don't think it will recede to the level that makes him a viable leader for the Conservative Party going into the next election," Fielding said. "He's a dead duck."

Italy's next moral compass? Berlusconi, 85, eyes presidency

By FRANCES D'EMILIO Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Italy is poised to elect a new president, meant to serve as the nation's moral compass and foster unity by rising above the political fray.

Silvio Berlusconi thinks he fits the bill.

The billionaire media mogul and three times premier, who entered politics nearly 30 years ago with his Forza Italia party, is maneuvering to add Italy's highest office to his resume.

No matter that he had a tax fraud conviction which got him expelled from the Senate. As for his moral example, the 85-year-old has long shrugged off outrage over his dalliances with young women at his "bunga bunga" soirees, once declaring "I'm no saint." In the most notorious case, he was ultimately acquitted of charges that he allegedly paid for sex with an underage girl.

From his latest villa on the Appia Antica, the ancient Roman consular road, Berlusconi, has for weeks been lobbying lawmakers outside his center-right fold for their votes when they elect the nation's next head of state for a seven-year term on Jan. 24.

By Tuesday, lawmaker and prominent art critic Vittorio Sgarbi, whom Berlusconi had tasked with scouting for support, indicated that prospects for nailing down sufficient votes were looking shaky

But whether Berlusconi might decide to bow out was unclear.

The new president will be selected by a total of 1,009 Grand Electors — lawmakers of both the lower Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, plus five senators-for life and special regional representatives. The first three rounds of voting require a two-thirds majority. After that, the threshold drops to a simple majority, 505 votes, and that's Berlusconi's target.

"There is a kind of megalomania about this man from the start" of his business career, and he would love to "top off his career with the highest office in the country," said John Harper, emeritus professor at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS Europe) in Bologna.

Berlusconi "might give it a try if he has any doubts as to the numbers, and see if he's anywhere near 500," Harper ventured. Or, if convinced the numbers aren't there, Berlusconi could renounce his candidacy, and support someone else. "And he'll come out looking as the man who guarantees (national) stability and has made a great gesture of sacrifice" by withdrawing, Harper said in a phone interview.

Berlusconi's two main partners in a center-right bloc, Matteo Salvini, who leads the anti-migrant League, and Giorgia Meloni, who heads the nationalist far-right Brothers of Italy, publicly backed his quest for the presidential palace on the Quirinal Hill.

But keen on avoiding any embarrassment for the bloc ahead of elections for Parliament, due by spring 2023, Salvini is also pressing Berlusconi to guarantee victory or step aside.

With it "extremely improbable" that Berlusconi could snag the needed votes, it would become a matter of when "he passes from candidate to kingmaker" by shifting his bloc's votes behind someone else, said political scientist Giovanni Orsina, a professor in the LUISS university School of Government in Rome.

Former Premier Enrico Letta, who heads the Democratic Party, blasted the center-right's decision last week to back Berlusconi as "a profoundly wrong choice."

"Every political (party) leader is divisive, but when we think of Silvio Berlusconi, in the history of these 25 years, it's difficult to think of a political chief more divisive than him," Letta told his party.

Berlusconi has long been dogged by political opponents' contentions of conflict of interest, since his business empire includes Italy's three main private TV networks.

Earlier this month, a few hundred protesters turned out in the heart of Rome chanting: "the Quirinale is not a bunga bunga" party.

The president of the Chamber of Deputies, Roberto Fico, a leader of the populist 5-Star Movement, told state TV in an interview this week that Italy's president must be someone with "high morality."

Berlusconi has struggled over the years with heart and other health problems and was hospitalized for COVID-19.

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The current head of state, Sergio Mattarella, whose term expires on Feb. 3, has repeatedly said he doesn't want to run again for president. Mattarella, who began his political career as a Christian Democrat, was a judge on the constitutional court when he was elected head of state in 2015.

For decades, the president's role was viewed as chiefly ceremonial, although the head of state can dissolve Parliament if the legislature seems hopelessly gridlocked. But recent presidents have taken a more dynamic role.

Mattarella last year tapped Mario Draghi, the former European Central Bank chief, to head a pandemic-university government embracing parties from the left to the right. Draghi succeeded populist Premier Giuseppe Conte, after confidence ebbed — even among his allies — that the latter could shepherd Italy's economy and society through the ravages of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Draghi, whose "whatever it takes" strategy has been largely credited with saving the euro currency during the last decade's financial crisis, has been coy when repeatedly asked by reporters if he wants to be president, but he has also left the door open.

Any bowing out of the bid for the presidency by Berlusconi would largely be greeted by relief by European officials, "especially in the context of Italy's restored prestige, with Mattarella and Draghi raising the profile of the country" on the continent, Harper said.

Israeli general turned lawmaker emerges as settler critic

By TIA GOLDENBERG Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Retired general Yair Golan spent a significant part of his military career serving in the occupied West Bank, protecting Jewish settlements. Today, he is one of their most vocal critics.

Golan, a former deputy military chief, is now a legislator with the dovish Meretz party, where he has repeatedly spoken out against settler violence against Palestinians.

His comments, highlighted by his recent description of violent settlers as "subhuman," have rattled Israel's delicate governing coalition, and his opponents have labeled him a radical. He joins a cadre of former security personnel who, after not speaking up while in uniform and positions of influence, have in retirement sounded the alarm over Israel's five-decade-long military rule of the Palestinians.

"You can't have a free and democratic state so long as we are controlling people who don't want to be controlled by us," Golan told The Associated Press in an interview at his office in the Knesset this week. "What kind of democracy are we building here long term?"

Golan has emerged as a rare critical voice in a society where the occupation is largely an accepted fact and where settlers have successfully pushed their narrative through their proximity to the levers of power. Most members of Israel's parliament belong to the pro-settlement right wing.

Golan, 59, had a long military career, being wounded in action in Lebanon and filling key positions as head of the country's northern command and as commander of the West Bank, among others.

Along the way, he gained a reputation as a maverick for decisions that sometimes landed him in hot water. At one point, he reached an unauthorized deal to remove some settlers from the West Bank city of Hebron. He was reprimanded and a promotion was delayed after he permitted the use of Palestinian non-combatants as human shields during arrest raids, a tactic the country's Supreme Court banned.

At the same time, he was credited with permitting thousands of Syrians wounded in their country's civil war to enter Israel for medical treatment.

As the deputy military chief, he was passed over for the top job after comparing what he saw as fascistic trends in modern-day Israel to Nazi Germany. He believes the speech cost him the position.

A few years after retirement, he was elected to parliament and eventually joined Meretz, a party that supports Palestinian statehood and is part of the current coalition headed by Prime Minister Naftali Bennett.

Meretz has been one of the few parties to make ending Israel's occupation a top priority. But since joining the coalition, which has agreed to focus on less divisive issues to maintain its stability, most of its members have appeared to tone down their criticism.

Golan has not. Earlier this month, he caused a firestorm when he lashed out against settlers who van-

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dalized graves in the Palestinian West Bank village of Burqa.

"These are not people, these are subhumans," Golan told the Knesset Channel. "They must not be given any backing."

His remarks angered Bennett, a former settler leader, and sparked criticism from others within the coalition.

Golan acknowledged his choice of words was flawed but said he stands by the spirit of his remarks.

"Is the problem the expression that I used or is the problem those same people who go up to Burqa, smash graves, damage property and assault innocent Palestinians?" he said.

Such statements have turned him into a poster boy for what far-right nationalists describe as dangerous forces in the coalition challenging Israel's role in the West Bank. The Palestinians seek the area, captured by Israel in 1967, as the heartland of a future state.

Some on Israel's dovish left also have been hesitant to embrace Golan, who continues to defend the army's actions in the West Bank.

Golan always saw his duty in the territory as primarily combatting Palestinian militants, and he continues to believe that most settlers are law-abiding citizens. The international community overwhelmingly considers all settlements illegal or illegitimate, and the Palestinians and many left-wing Israelis see the military as an enforcer of an unjust occupation.

Breaking the Silence, a whistleblower group for former Israeli soldiers who oppose policies in the West Bank, called for action, not just words, against settler violence.

"Yair Golan knows full well what settler violence looks like and what our violent control over the Palestinian people looks like. That's why his criticism is valuable, but it's not enough," the group said in a statement.

Golan said he always saw Israeli control over Palestinian territories as temporary. He said separating from the Palestinians is the only way to keep Israel a democratic state with a Jewish majority.

In 2006, Golan commanded the violent evacuation of the Amona settlement in the West Bank, which was built on privately owned Palestinian land.

"I can't come to terms with the idea that someone Jewish who holds Jewish values supports the theft of someone else's lands," he said.

In recent months, as violence between settlers and Palestinians in the West Bank has ticked up, videos have emerged of soldiers standing by as settlers rampage. Golan said he never would have allowed such a thing under his command.

"These people don't accept the essence of Israel and abide by the law only when it's convenient for them," he said.

His comments about settlers aren't the first to rankle the establishment. In a 2016 speech marking Israel's Holocaust memorial day, Golan, then deputy military chief, said he was witnessing "nauseating processes" in Israeli society that reminded him of the fascism of Nazi-era Germany.

He said the remarks were sparked by the fatal shooting of a subdued Palestinian attacker by a soldier. The soldier was embraced by nationalist politicians, including then-Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Golan said the shooting was nothing short of an execution.

Next to his desk, Golan keeps a photo of Netanyahu arriving for his corruption trial at a Jerusalem courthouse, surrounded by his Likud Party supporters as he rants against police and prosecutors.

Golan said the image is a reminder of what he is fighting against — and for.

"I served the country in uniform for so many years, I really gave it my life," Golan said. Pointing to the photo, he said: "I didn't endanger my life countless times for these people."

Parts of Southeast await a blast of snow, ice, freezing rain

NORFOLK, Va. (AP) — Several schools have canceled classes in coastal areas of the Carolinas and Virginia and authorities are urging drivers to stay off potentially icy roads amid forecasts of snow, sleet and freezing rain.

The governors of North Carolina, South Carolina and Virginia declared states of emergency ahead of

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the latest winter storm system sweeping into the region Thursday and a round snow expected to follow Friday night into Saturday. The winter blast could ice over a large swath of eastern North Carolina and the northeastern corner of South Carolina, while dumping snow around Norfolk, Virginia, the National Weather Service said.

Virginia Gov. Glenn Youngkin declared a state of emergency Thursday that will remain in effect through Saturday, saying his executive order allows for greater flexibility in mobilizing people and resources to respond.

"I urge all Virginians to monitor their local weather forecasts and take personal safety precautions to ensure their safety and the safety of their families," Youngkin said in a statement. He urged people to stay off roads during hazardous conditions.

North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper signed a state of emergency at midweek, awaiting the second storm to hit the state in days. He said 114 National Guard troops were staging in central and eastern North Carolina to prepare to move to the affected areas. He said ice accumulations could cause extended power outages and warned temperatures could dip below freezing in coming days.

"We're a little more concerned about this one because it's going to be so cold Friday and Saturday night, and if there are power outages, then we are concerned about maybe some families who can't stay warm," he told reporters.

In South Carolina, where Gov. Henry McMaster also declared a state of emergency, schools and government offices around Charleston and other places that don't see much frozen precipitation closed or announced shortened hours Friday. Freezing rain, sleet and snow were expected to start spreading across the state around sunrise. And utilities in the northeastern part of the state warned major power outages were possible.

An ice storm warning was issued in northeastern South Carolina and southeastern North Carolina, where rain was expected to change to mixed precipitation that includes freezing rain. The area could receive up to a quarter inch (0.6 centimeters) of ice before Sunday.

A threat of snow Thursday in parts of eastern Virginia and North Carolina was expected to be followed by a more significant round of snow arriving Friday night into Saturday morning. Parts of the area could get 3 to 5 inches (8 to 13 centimeters) of snow, according to the National Weather Service. Areas around Norfolk could see more than 5 inches (13 centimeters).

In northeastern North Carolina, Perquimans County school officials noted the rarity of snow in the area in announcing schools would be closed on Friday. Forecasters said the area could see several inches of snow.

"It is not often that we get to experience snow in Northeastern NC and we hope this will be a day that you can enjoy with your children," the school district's website said. "Stay safe, stay warm, and enjoy the snow!"

Around Wilmington, North Carolina, New Hanover County Schools said it was canceling Friday athletics and after-school activities and holding classes remotely because of icy conditions. Nearby Brunswick County canceled school altogether Friday due to the weather.

To the north in Virginia, Virginia Beach also canceled after-school activities and went to an asynchronous schedule for Friday. Citing the snow forecast, Norfolk Public Schools canceled class, adding the admonishment: "Stay Safe!"

UN chief: World worse now due to COVID, climate, conflict

By EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — As he starts his second term as U.N. secretary-general, Antonio Guterres said Thursday the world is worse in many ways than it was five years ago because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate crisis and geopolitical tensions that have sparked conflicts everywhere — but unlike U.S. President Joe Biden he thinks Russia will not invade Ukraine.

Guterres said in an interview with The Associated Press that the appeal for peace he issued on his first day in the U.N.'s top job on Jan. 1, 2017 and his priorities in his first term of trying to prevent conflicts and

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tackle global inequalities, the COVID-19 crisis and a warming planet haven't changed.

"The secretary-general of the U.N. has no power," Guterres said. "We can have influence. I can persuade. I can mediate, but I have no power."

Before he became U.N. chief, Guterres said he envisioned the post as being "a convener, a mediator, a bridge-builder and an honest broker to help find solutions that benefit everyone involved."

He said Thursday these are things "I need to do every day."

As an example, the secretary-general said this week he spoke to the African Union's envoy Olusegun Obasanjo, twice with Kenya's President Uhuru Kenyatta, and once with Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in his attempt to get a cessation of hostilities in Ethiopia between the government and forces in the embattled Tigray region.

"I hope that we are in a situation in which it might become soon possible to have a cessation of hostilities and that is where I'm concentrating most of my efforts," Guterres said.

As another example, Guterres said he has also been on the phone to try to get Mali's military leaders who recently delayed elections scheduled for next month to 2026 to reduce the timetable. He said he spoke to Mali's military ruler, President Assimi Goita, three presidents from the 15-nation West African regional group ECOWAS, Algeria's prime minister and the African Union's leader about "how to make sure that in Mali, there is an acceptable calendar for the transition to a civilian government."

Guterres said he hopes Mali's military leaders will understand that they need to accept "a reasonable period" before elections. The secretary-general believes voting should be held in "a relatively short amount of time," and said: "All my efforts have been in creating conditions for bridging this divide and for allowing ECOWAS and the government of Mali to come to a solution with an acceptable delay for the elections."

Guterres said the U.N. Security Council, which does have the power to uphold international peace and security including by imposing sanctions and ordering military action, is divided, especially its five veto-wielding permanent members. Russia and China are often at odds with the U.S., Britain and France on key issues, including Thursday on new sanctions against North Korea.

On the issue on every country's front burner now — whether Russia, which has massed 100,000 troops on Ukraine's border, will invade the former Soviet republic — Guterres said, "I do not think Russia will invade Ukraine, and I hope that my belief is correct."

What makes him think Moscow won't invade when Biden and others believe Russian President Vladimir Putin will send troops into Ukraine?

"Because I do not believe in a military solution for the problems that exists, and I think that the most rational way to solve those problems is through diplomacy and through engagement in serious dialogue," Guterres said, stressing that an invasion would have "terrible consequences."

The secretary-general said "we have been in contact, of course" with top officials in Russia, though the U.N. is not directly engaged in the Ukraine crisis.

Guterres is scheduled to deliver a speech to the 193 U.N. member nations in the General Assembly on Friday on his priorities for 2022.

He singled out three immediate priorities that "are worrying me enormously": the lack of vaccinations in large parts of the world, especially in Africa; the need to reduce emissions by 45% in this decade to try to meet the international goal of trying to limit future global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit); and the "extremely unjust" financial situation in the world that favors rich countries.

Many developing countries have very few resources, high debts that are growing and they pay much higher interest rates than in Europe or North America, have no vaccines, and disproportionately "suffer the impacts of climate change," Guterres said.

"We need a deep reform in our international financial system in order to make sure that there is more justice in the way resources are available to allow for the recovery (from COVID-19) to be possible everywhere," he said.

On another major issue, Guterres stressed that the Afghan people can't be collectively punished for "wrong things that are done by the Taliban," so it is absolutely essential to massively increase humanitar-

ian aid "because the Afghans are in a desperate situation with the risks of deaths by hunger" and disease in a frigid winter with COVID-19.

"More than half the population is in desperate need of humanitarian aid," he said, and money needs to be injected into the economy to ensure Afghan banks operate and doctors, teachers, engineers and other workers are paid to prevent the country's economic collapse.

The issue of recognition of the Taliban government is up to member states, Guterres said, but the U.N. has been pressing the Taliban, which took power in August as U.S.-led NATO forces were departing after 20 years, to ensure human rights, especially women's rights to work and girls' education, and to make the government more inclusive and reflective of Afghanistan's diverse population.

The secretary-general said he will be attending the Beijing Olympics in February "which is not a political act" but "to be present when all the world comes together for good — for a peaceful message."

Jury in federal trial in Floyd killing appears mostly white

By AMY FORLITI and STEVE KARNOWSKI Associated Press

ST. PAUL, Minn. (AP) — A jury of 18 people who appeared mostly white was picked Thursday for the federal trial of three Minneapolis police officers charged in George Floyd's killing, a case that the judge told potential jurors has "absolutely nothing" to do with race.

The jurors chosen to hear the case against former Officers Tou Thao, Thomas Lane and J. Kueng appeared to include one person of Asian descent among the 12 jurors who would deliberate if no alternates are needed, and a second person of Asian descent among the six alternates, with all others appearing white. The court declined to provide demographic information.

Thao, who is Hmong American; Lane, who is white; and Kueng, who is Black, are broadly charged with depriving Floyd of his civil rights while acting under government authority as Derek Chauvin, who is white, used his knee to pin the Black man to the street. The videotaped killing triggered worldwide protests, violence and a reexamination of racism and policing. Opening statements are scheduled for Monday.

The single day of jury selection was remarkably rapid compared with Chauvin's trial on state charges, where the process took more than two weeks. The apparent jury makeup would also sharply contrast with Chauvin's jury, which was half white and half nonwhite.

Responding to a potential juror who said he wasn't sure he could be impartial "due to my color," U.S. District Judge Paul Magnuson sought to reassure him and other jurors in the pool.

"There is absolutely nothing about the subject of religion, race or ethnicity that's involved in this case," Magnuson said.

The man, an immigrant who appeared to be Black, was later dismissed.

Two legal experts said Magnuson's remark was accurate from a legal perspective. They noted the officers aren't accused of targeting Floyd because he was Black, but rather of depriving him of his constitutional rights.

"It is true that it has nothing to do with race in the framework of the law and facts," Joe Daly, an emeritus professor at Mitchell Hamline Law School, said. "But from what I can see it has almost everything to do with race. It has to do with what we know about how police enforce minor crimes against African Americans, how police have acted toward African Americans, minority people."

Mike Brandt, a local defense attorney not connected with the case, said Floyd's killing "was kind of the tipping point of unarmed Black men being killed at the hands of police. It had everything to do with race."

The jury pool was selected from throughout the state — much more conservative and less diverse than the Minneapolis area from which the jury for Chauvin's state trial was drawn. That jury convicted Chauvin of murder and manslaughter. He later pleaded guilty to a federal civil rights charge.

Three of the jurors who will deliberate at the federal trial and one of the alternates are from Hennepin County, where Minneapolis is located.

Scholars and legal experts have increasingly advocated for greater jury diversity, not just in race but also by gender and socioeconomic background. They say jurors who share the same background are unlikely

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to have their biases and preconceptions questioned during deliberations.

"If I was (prosecuting this case), I would want a jury made up of Black jurors," Brandt said. "If I'm representing these cops, I would prefer a white jury, which is what they have here."

The three officers face a separate state trial, scheduled for June 13, on charges of aiding and abetting both murder and manslaughter.

Legal experts say the federal trial will be more complicated because prosecutors must prove the officers willfully violated Floyd's constitutional rights — unreasonably seizing him and depriving him of liberty without due process.

Floyd, 46, died on May 25, 2020, after Chauvin pinned him to the ground with his knee on Floyd's neck for 9 1/2 minutes while Floyd was facedown, handcuffed and gasping for air. Kueng knelt on Floyd's back and Lane held down his legs. Thao kept bystanders from intervening.

A statement from attorneys for the Floyd family Thursday said bystander video showed that the three officers "directly contributed to (Floyd's) death and failed to intervene to stop the senseless murder."

Magnuson, who questioned potential jurors, stressed repeatedly that Chauvin's cases should not influence the proceedings. Magnuson told jurors he was "harping and harping and harping" because state and federal law are different and he wanted to ensure they could be objective.

Federal prosecutors face a high legal standard to show that an officer willfully deprived someone of their constitutional rights. Essentially, prosecutors must prove that the officers knew what they were doing was wrong, but did it anyway.

Kueng, Lane and Thao are all charged with willfully depriving Floyd of the right to be free from an officer's deliberate indifference to his medical needs. The indictment says the three men saw Floyd needed medical care and failed to help him.

Thao and Kueng are also charged with a second count alleging they willfully violated Floyd's right to be free from unreasonable seizure by not stopping Chauvin as he knelt on Floyd's neck. It's not clear why Lane is not mentioned in that count, but evidence shows he asked twice whether Floyd should be rolled on his side.

Both counts allege the officers' actions resulted in Floyd's death.

Such federal civil rights violations are punishable by up to life in prison or even death, but federal sentencing guidelines indicate the officers would get much less if convicted.

Florida man charged after 4 found dead at Canada-US border

WINNIPEG, Manitoba (AP) — A Florida man was charged Thursday with human smuggling after the bodies of four people, including a baby and a teen, were found in Canada near the U.S. border in what authorities believe was a failed crossing attempt during a freezing blizzard.

The United States Attorney's Office for the District of Minnesota said Steve Shand, 47, has been charged with human smuggling after seven Indian nationals were found in the U.S. and the discovery of the bodies.

Court documents filed Wednesday in support of Shand's arrest allege one of the people spent a significant amount of money to come to Canada with a fraudulent student visa.

"The investigation into the death of the four individuals in Canada is ongoing along with an investigation into a larger human smuggling operation of which Shand is suspected of being a part," John Stanley, a special agent with Homeland Security Investigations, said in court documents.

According to documents, a U.S. Border Patrol in North Dakota stopped a 15-passenger van just south of the Canadian border on Wednesday. Shand was driving and court documents allege he was with two undocumented Indian nationals.

Around the same time, court documents said five other people were spotted by law enforcement in the snow nearby. The group, who were also Indian nationals, told officers they'd been walking for more than 11 hours outside in frigid conditions.

A woman stopped breathing several times as she was transported to hospital. Court documents said she will require partial amputation of her hand. A man was also hospitalized for frostbite but was later released.

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One of the men in the group was carrying a backpack that had baby supplies in it. Court documents said he told officers it belonged to a family who had become separated from the group overnight.

RCMP Assistant Commissioner Jane MacLatchy told a news conference in Winnipeg Thursday that once Mounties were notified the family may still be in Manitoba officers immediately began to search the area.

After a difficult search in nearly impassible terrain, she said officers found three bodies together — a man, a woman and a baby — just 10 meters from the border near Emerson, Man. The search continued and a teen boy was found a short distance away. It is believed they died from exposure.

“It is an absolute and heartbreaking tragedy,” MacLatchy said.

They were wearing winter clothing, she said, but it would not have been enough to save them with the freezing conditions.

“These victims faced not only the cold weather but also endless fields, large snowdrifts and complete darkness,” MacLatchy added.

Shand was arrested Wednesday and remains in custody. American authorities allege in court documents that Shand has likely been involved in other border crossings, including two recent incidents in December.

Shand could not be immediately reached for comment.

Officials in both countries said it is more common to see crossings north from the U.S. into Canada. Border crossings into Canada on foot increased in 2016 following the election of former U.S. president Donald Trump.

That December, two men lost their fingers to severe frostbite after getting caught in a blizzard while walking from the U.S. into Manitoba. A few months later, a woman died of hypothermia near the border on the American side.

In 2019, a pregnant woman who walked across the border was rescued after she became trapped in a snowbank and went into labor.

Emerson-Franklin Reeve Dave Carlson said illegal crossings there have dropped significantly in recent years. He was surprised to learn of the four deaths.

“If you look at the political climate on both sides of the border, it’s just mind-boggling to me that anyone had that sense of desperation to try and cross in extreme conditions.”

Deputy Patrick Klegstad with the Kittson County Sheriff’s Office in Minnesota said his department is supporting the American side of the investigation. Its officers patrol the “desolate” open fields near the border every day, he said, and the area where people crossed is treacherous, especially in the cold.

“Why they picked that spot to travel would be the million-dollar question.”

Klegstad, echoing Canadian officials, said it’s uncommon to have people make the harrowing journey from Canada into the U.S.

“It’s not very often we do have southbounders.”

Jury in federal trial in Floyd killing appears mostly white

By AMY FORLITI and STEVE KARNOWSKI Associated Press

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Federal prosecutors face a high legal standard to show that an officer willfully deprived someone of their constitutional rights. Essentially, prosecutors must prove that the officers knew what they were doing was wrong, but did it anyway.

Kueng, Lane and Thao are all charged with willfully depriving Floyd of the right to be free from an officer's deliberate indifference to his medical needs. The indictment says the three men saw Floyd needed medical care and failed to help him.

Thao and Kueng are also charged with a second count alleging they willfully violated Floyd's right to be free from unreasonable seizure by not stopping Chauvin as he knelt on Floyd's neck. It's not clear why Lane is not mentioned in that count, but evidence shows he asked twice whether Floyd should be rolled on his side.

Both counts allege the officers' actions resulted in Floyd's death.

Such federal civil rights violations are punishable by up to life in prison or even death, but federal sentencing guidelines indicate the officers would get much less if convicted.

Biden issues new warning to Russia over invading Ukraine

By MATTHEW LEE, AAMER MADHANI and FRANK JORDANS Associated Press

GENEVA (AP) — U.S. President Joe Biden said Thursday that any Russian troop movements across Ukraine's border would constitute an invasion and that Moscow would "pay a heavy price" for such an action.

It was the latest White House effort to clear up comments Biden made a day earlier when he suggested that a "minor incursion" by Russia into Ukrainian territory could result in a more measured response by the United States and allies.

Facing an avalanche of criticism from Republican lawmakers and Ukrainian officials that Biden's comments had invited limited military action by Russian President Vladimir Putin, Biden sought to clarify his remarks at the start of a meeting at the White House focused on domestic policy.

"I've been absolutely clear with President Putin," Biden said. "He has no misunderstanding: Any, any assembled Russian units move across the Ukrainian border, that is an invasion," said Biden, adding that an invasion would be met with a "severe and coordinated economic response."

His comments came as U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken prepared to meet Friday in Geneva with Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in a high-stakes bid to ease tensions that appears likely to fail.

Biden said the U.S. was preparing for Russia to take action that fell outside the parameters of conventional warfare.

"Russia has a long history of using measures other than overt military action to carry out aggression — paramilitary tactics, so-called gray zone attacks and actions by Russian soldiers not wearing Russian uniforms," he said.

On Wednesday, Biden said he thinks Moscow will invade and warned Putin that Russia would pay a "dear price" in lives lost and a possible cutoff from the global banking system if it does.

But Biden also prompted consternation among allies by saying the response to a Russian invasion "depends on what it does."

"It's one thing if it's a minor incursion and then we end up having a fight about what to do and not do, et cetera," he said.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy was among those expressing concern.

"We want to remind the great powers that there are no minor incursions and small nations. Just as there are no minor casualties and little grief from the loss of loved ones," he tweeted.

Before traveling to Geneva, Blinken warned in Berlin that there would be a "swift, severe" response from the United States and its allies if Russia sent any military forces into Ukraine.

"If any Russian military forces move across the Ukrainian border and commit new acts of aggression against Ukraine, that will be met with a swift, severe, united response from the United States and our allies and partners," Blinken told a news conference with his German counterpart.

Later, Blinken accused Russia of threatening the foundations of world order with its buildup of an estimated 100,000 troops near Ukraine.

Russia must face a concerted and severe global response if it invades, he said in a speech in Berlin, the city that symbolized the Cold War split between East and West.

"These are difficult issues we are facing, and resolving them won't happen quickly," Blinken said. "I certainly don't expect we'll solve them in Geneva tomorrow."

He later told an audience at the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences that Russia's actions toward Ukraine are an attempt to subvert international norms and just the latest in a series of violations of numerous treaties, agreements and other commitments Moscow has made to respect the sovereignty and territory of other countries.

"Perhaps no place in the world experienced the divisions of the Cold War more than this city," Blinken said. "Here, President Kennedy declared all free people citizens of Berlin. Here, President Reagan urged Mr. Gorbachev to tear down that wall. It seems at times that President Putin wants to return to that era."

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We hope not.”

Blinken met earlier with top diplomats from Britain, France and Germany to project a united front over concerns that Russia may be planning to invade Ukraine. He met Ukraine’s president in Kyiv a day earlier.

Blinken took pains Thursday to stress the U.S. and its partners were united, noting that American diplomats have held more than 100 meetings with allies in recent weeks “to ensure that we are speaking and acting together with one voice when it comes to Russia.”

“That unity gives us strength, a strength I might add that Russia does not and cannot match,” he said. “It’s why we build voluntary alliances and partnerships in the first place. It’s also why Russia recklessly seeks to divide us.”

In Washington, the Biden administration announced Thursday it has levied new sanctions against four Ukrainian officials who administration officials say are part of a Russian influence effort to set the pretext for an invasion. The sanctions name parliament members Taras Kozak and Oleh Voloshyn and two former government officials. All four have been intimately involved in disinformation efforts by Russia’s federal security service, known as the FSB, according to Treasury.

Russia denies it is planning an invasion and, in turn, accused the West of plotting “provocations” in Ukraine, citing the delivery of weapons to the country by British military transports in recent days.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova alleged Ukrainian and Western talk of an imminent Russian attack was a “cover for staging large-scale provocations of their own, including those of military character.”

Russia wants binding security guarantees, including a permanent prohibition on Ukrainian membership in NATO, to which Kyiv aspires, and the removal of most of the U.S. and allied military presence in eastern Europe.

The U.S. and its European partners say they are willing to consider certain less-dramatic gestures but that the Russian demands are out of the question and that Putin knows they are nonstarters. That, Blinken said, is proof of Putin’s ulterior motive.

“So far, our good-faith gestures have been rebuffed — because, in truth, this crisis is not primarily about weapons or military bases,” he said. “It’s about the sovereignty and self-determination of Ukraine and other post-Soviet states. And at its core, it’s about Russia’s rejection of a post-Cold War Europe that is whole and free.”

Russia on Thursday announced sweeping naval maneuvers through February, some apparently in the Black Sea, involving over 140 warships and more than 60 aircraft. Separately, Spain’s defense minister said the country was sending two warships to the Black Sea with NATO approval.

Amid concerns that Putin may not be moved by threats of sanctions, Blinken made a direct appeal to the Russian people to oppose any intervention.

“You deserve to live with security and dignity, like all people everywhere, and no one — not Ukraine, not the United States, not the countries of NATO — is seeking to jeopardize that. But what really risks your security is a pointless war with your neighbors in Ukraine, with all the costs that come with it — most of all, for the young people who will risk or even give their lives to it,” he said.

The U.S. and NATO face a difficult task on Ukraine. Biden has said he is not planning to send combat troops in the case of a further Russian invasion. But he could pursue less dramatic yet still risky military options, including supporting a post-invasion Ukrainian resistance.

The rationale for not directly joining a Russia-Ukraine war is simple: The U.S. has no treaty obligation to Ukraine, and war with Russia would be an enormous gamble. But doing too little has risks, too.

Penn pledges to work with NCAA, support transgender swimmer

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — The University of Pennsylvania said it will work with the NCAA under its newly adopted standards for transgender athletes.

Swimmer Lia Thomas, who competed for the men’s team at Penn before transitioning, has qualified to compete in March at the 2022 NCAA swimming and diving championships. She is set to race in the

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women's 200-yard, 500-yard and 1,650-yard freestyle.

"Penn Athletics is aware of the NCAA's new transgender participation policy," the Ivy League school said Thursday in a statement. "In support of our student-athlete, Lia Thomas, we will work with the NCAA regarding her participation under the newly adopted standards for the 2022 NCAA Swimming and Diving Championship."

Under the new guidelines, approved by the NCAA Board of Governors on Wednesday, transgender participation for each sport will be determined by the policy for the sport's national governing body, subject to review and recommendation by an NCAA committee to the Board of Governors.

When there is no national governing body, that sport's international federation policy would be in place. If there is no international federation policy, previously established IOC policy criteria would take over.

"Approximately 80% of U.S. Olympians are either current or former college athletes," NCAA President Mark Emmert said in a statement announcing the guidelines. "This policy alignment provides consistency and further strengthens the relationship between college sports and the U.S. Olympics."

The NCAA policy is effective immediately, beginning with the 2022 winter championships. Penn did not immediately respond to requests for comment on how the policy would affect Thomas.

NCAA rules on transgender athletes returned to the forefront when Thomas started smashing records this year. She was on the men's team her first three years, but after transitioning she moved to the women's team.

The Board of Governors is suggesting NCAA divisions allow for additional eligibility if a transgender student-athlete loses eligibility based on the policy change. That flexibility is provided they meet the NCAA's new guidelines.

Year 2: Biden plans more public outreach, less legislating

By ZEKE MILLER and ALEXANDRA JAFFE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden launched into his second year in office Thursday with a new focus on making fatigued Americans believe they're better off under his leadership as he embraces a pared-back agenda before the midterm elections.

The persistence of the coronavirus, rising inflation and congressional gridlock have exacted a bitter toll on Biden's approval rating and threaten a midterm routing for his party, but the president sees no need for a major shift in direction.

Instead, Biden told Democratic National Committee members during a virtual grassroots event Thursday that Democrats broadly have to offer a clearer contrast with Republicans going forward. He said the contrast he hopes to paint is between Democrats' agenda and the lack thereof from the Republican Party, which he said was "completely controlled by one man, that's focused on relitigating the past" — a veiled reference to former President Donald Trump and his continued false claims that he won the 2020 election.

"That's the choice we have to present before voters: Between the plans we have to improve the lives of the American people, and no plan, none at all," Biden said.

White House aides have also previewed subtler changes to how Biden devotes his time, with a greater emphasis on speaking directly to Americans and less time in the weeds with lawmakers crafting legislation.

"He wants to spend more time out in the country and less time behind closed doors negotiating," White House press secretary Jen Psaki told reporters Thursday. She said Biden would rely on his aides more to engage in legislative negotiations, aiming to free up more of his own time to travel and sell his policies.

The understated White House response to a parade of bad headlines reflects the administration's internal confidence that its predicament will lessen in coming months as the omicron variant of COVID-19 recedes and his policies have time to take effect. Administration officials believe they have until the summer to prop up Biden's approval rating in order to help save as many Democratic congressional seats as possible.

"The public doesn't want me to be the 'president senator,'" Biden said in a rare news conference Wednesday. "They want me to be the president and let senators be senators." Biden acknowledged "there's a lot of frustration and fatigue in this country" and placed responsibility for that squarely on the pandemic,

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“the new enemy.”

A video released Thursday by Biden’s inaugural committee to mark the end of his first year in office offered a preview of what’s to come. The ad highlights progress on the economy and against the virus, but acknowledges the work isn’t done.

“It isn’t all the way back, but it’s getting stronger,” narrator Tom Hanks says of the economy. “We may be entering year three of a pandemic none of us wanted or expected, but we’re moving.”

“I can feel the change,” Sandra Lindsay, the New York nurse who was the first person in the U.S. to get an approved COVID-19 vaccine, says in the video.

Getting Americans to recognize that change is a priority for the White House.

The pandemic and its aftermath altered how voters judge Biden’s performance. His \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package launched the economy toward a fast recovery, but it also drove inflation to a 7% rate that frightened voters. The result is an unusual schism in which voters are financially comfortable yet deeply skeptical about the health of the national economy.

While 64% of Americans described their financial conditions as good, only 35% felt positive about the overall economy, according to a December poll from the AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

Biden spent part of Thursday meeting with his Infrastructure Implementation Task Force, charged with swiftly turning last year’s bipartisan infrastructure law into shovels in the ground and new jobs created. Billions of dollars have already been allocated, and Biden wants to ensure he gets the credit.

While the White House didn’t immediately announce travel plans for Biden, Vice President Kamala Harris is set to travel to California and Wisconsin this week to spotlight how money from the law is being put to use to combat wildfires and replace lead water pipes.

Biden insists he’s not giving up on his nearly \$2 trillion domestic priorities bill, but said Wednesday he hoped “chunks” would pass before the midterms. Slimming down the bill would probably be necessary to win over Democratic holdout Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia. But House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said Thursday she didn’t want the legislation to lose its ambitions to address climate change and lower costs for working class families.

“What the president calls ‘chunks’ I’d hope would be a major bill going forward,” she said.

Eric Schultz, a former spokesman for President Barack Obama, said the administration has so far gotten too bogged down in the minutiae of legislative negotiations. He suggested that it course-correct by sending Biden out of Washington to talk more about the specifics of how his agenda has helped average Americans.

“Joe Biden as is at his best when he’s talking directly to the American people about what they care about,” he said.

He also argued that Democrats need to be more forceful in drawing a contrast with Republicans.

“People need to understand that he has their back,” Schultz said. “And the Republicans don’t. And so when he makes that case, it reinforces who in Washington is working for them.”

Ben LaBolt, another former Obama spokesman, suggested that the legislative difficulties of Biden’s first year had a silver lining: “tempered expectations” for what’s possible, as well as a “sense of urgency” on the part of Democrats to get something done in Congress before the midterms, when they could lose control of either or both chambers.

“The accomplishments of the past year have not fully baked in with the average American yet,” he said. “And it takes time for them to learn about legislation after it passes,” he said.

Democrats eye new strategy after failure of voting bill

By BRIAN SLODYSKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Democrats were picking up the pieces Thursday following the collapse of their top-priority voting rights legislation, with some shifting their focus to a narrower bipartisan effort to repair laws Donald Trump exploited in his bid to overturn the 2020 election.

Though their bid to dramatically rewrite U.S. election law failed during a high-stakes Senate floor show-

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down late Wednesday, Democrats insisted their brinksmanship has made the new effort possible, forcing Republicans to relent, even if just a little, and engage in bipartisan negotiations.

The nascent push is focused on the Electoral Count Act, an 1887 law that created the convoluted process for the certification of presidential election results by Congress. For more than 100 years, vulnerabilities in the law were an afterthought, until Trump's unrelenting, false claims that voter fraud cost him the 2020 election culminated in a mob of his supporters storming the Capitol.

An overhaul of the Gilded Age statute could be Democrats' best chance to address what they call an existential threat to American democracy from Trump's "big lie" about a stolen election. But with serious talks only beginning in the Senate and dwindling time before this year's midterm elections, reaching consensus could prove difficult.

"We know history is on the side of voting rights, and we know that forcing leaders to take stands will ultimately move the ball forward," Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said Thursday.

Just weeks ago, many Democrats were adamant that updating the Electoral Count Act was no substitute for their voting legislation. Updating the 1887 law, they pointed out, would do nothing to counter the Trump-inspired push in 19 states to make it more difficult to vote.

They still hold that position, but after the defeat of their marquee elections bill, they are running out of options. Meanwhile, Trump loyalists are girding for the next election, working to install sympathetic leaders in local election posts and, in some cases, backing political candidates who participated in the riot at the U.S. Capitol.

Biden conceded this week that updating the electoral bill may be Democrats' best opportunity to pass voting legislation through a 50-50 Senate, where much of his agenda has stalled.

"I predict to you they'll get something done," Biden told reporters Wednesday.

Any legislation would have to balance Democrats' desire to halt what they view as a GOP plan to make it more difficult for Black Americans and other minorities to vote with Republican's entrenched opposition to increased federal oversight of local elections.

"What other things could be put in there?" said South Carolina Rep. Jim Clyburn, the No. 3 House Democrat and a senior member of the Congressional Black Caucus. "I want to deal with more than just counting the votes for the president. I want to be sure that we count the votes for everybody else. So voter nullification like they're doing in Georgia, I think it can be addressed."

Republicans involved in the effort to update the Electoral Count Act acknowledge that the bill would need a wider focus.

Sen. Susan Collins of Maine is holding bipartisan talks with Republican Sens. Roger Wicker of Mississippi, Thom Tillis of North Carolina and Mitt Romney of Utah, as well as Democratic Sens. Joe Manchin of West Virginia, Jeanne Shaheen of New Hampshire and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona.

"It's such a needed thing," said Manchin, who added that the narrower scope was "the first place" Democrats "should have started."

Manchin and Sinema effectively tanked Democrats' marquee bill Wednesday, joining Republicans in voting against a rule change that would have allowed the party's voting legislation to pass with a simple majority.

Collins has proposed new protections for poll and elections workers, some of whom received chilling threats to their safety after the 2020 election. She has also called for more funding for local elections. Manchin wants harsh criminal penalties for those convicted of intimidating or threatening poll and election workers.

"It's a heavy lift, but if we continue to get people to talk there's a path," said Tillis, who said tensions over the Democrats' failed voting bill will need to cool before coalition building can seriously begin. "We are going to have to have more Republicans get on board because there are going to be protest votes."

But at its core, many Republicans want any legislation to primarily focus on the Electoral Count Act.

"This is directly related to Jan. 6," Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., said Thursday. "It needs fixing."

House Republican leader Kevin McCarthy on Thursday called it "an old piece of law, so you can always

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modernize it.”

The bipartisan House committee investigating the Jan. 6 insurrection is also working on a proposal.

As Trump’s legal appeals and efforts to pressure state and local officials ran out of steam, he began to focus on Mike Pence, who presided over the certification in Congress of the Electoral College results. Trump spent days in a futile bid trying to convince Pence that the vice president had the power to reject electors from battleground states that voted for Biden, even though the Constitution makes clear the vice president’s role in the joint session is largely ceremonial.

Separately, he encouraged Republican lawmakers to take advantage of the low threshold to lodge objections to the outcome. Even after rioters fought in brutal hand-to-hand combat with police as they lay siege to the Capital on Jan. 6, 147 Republican lawmakers later voted to object to Biden’s win.

Sen. Angus King, a Maine independent who caucuses with Democrats, is working on a bill that would shore up several key vulnerabilities in the Electoral College process.

Any legislation should make clear the vice president holds only a ceremonial role, limit the scope of Congress’ involvement in the certification of the election and narrow the grounds for raising an objection to a state’s results, according to a summary provided by his office.

Civil rights activists don’t object to the revisions. But they question the value of the effort if Republican-controlled states can still enact voting restrictions.

“It doesn’t matter if your votes are properly counted if you cannot cast your vote in the first place,” said Sen. Raphael Warnock, D-Ga., who is also pastor at the church Martin Luther King Jr. once led.

US charges Belarus with air piracy in reporter’s arrest

NEW YORK (AP) — U.S. prosecutors charged four Belarusian government officials on Thursday with aircraft piracy for diverting a Ryanair flight last year to arrest an opposition journalist, using a ruse that there was a bomb threat.

The charges, announced by federal prosecutors in New York, recounted how a regularly-scheduled passenger plane traveling between Athens, Greece, and Vilnius, Lithuania, on May 23 was diverted to Minsk, Belarus by air traffic control authorities there.

“Since the dawn of powered flight, countries around the world have cooperated to keep passenger airplanes safe. The defendants shattered those standards by diverting an airplane to further the improper purpose of repressing dissent and free speech,” U.S. Attorney Damian Williams said in a news release announcing the charges.

Ryanair said Belarusian flight controllers told the pilots there was a bomb threat against the jetliner and ordered it to land in Minsk. The Belarusian military scrambled a MiG-29 fighter jet in an apparent attempt to encourage the crew to comply with the flight controllers’ orders.

The journalist and activist who was arrested, Raman Pratasevich, ran a popular messaging app that helped organize mass demonstrations against Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko. The 26-year-old Pratasevich left Belarus in 2019 and faced charges there of inciting riots.

In August, U.S. President Joe Biden levied new sanctions against Belarus on the one-year anniversary of Lukashenko’s election to a sixth term leading the Eastern European nation — a vote the U.S. and international community said was fraught with irregularities.

Widespread belief that the 2020 vote was stolen triggered mass protests in Belarus that led to increased repressions by Lukashenko’s government on protesters, dissidents and independent media. More than 35,000 people were arrested and thousands were beaten and jailed. The protests lasted for months, petering out only when winter set in.

Those charged in court papers Thursday were identified as Leonid Mikalaevich Churo, director general of Belaeronavigatsia Republican Unitary Air Navigation Services Enterprise, the Belarusian state air navigation authority; Oleg Kazyuchits, deputy director general of Belaeronavigatsia; and two Belarusian state security agents whose full identities weren’t known to prosecutors.

U.S. prosecutors described the defendants as fugitives and said they were facing charges of conspiring

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to commit aircraft piracy, which carries a mandatory minimum sentence of 20 years in prison. Messages seeking comment were sent to the Belarusian embassy in Washington and the country's U.N. mission in New York; their phones rang unanswered Thursday evening.

U.S. officials say they have jurisdiction in the case because American citizens were aboard the flight.

After the episode last year, the European Union swiftly banned Belarusian airlines from using airspace and airports in the 27-nation bloc, urged EU-based carriers to avoid flying over Belarus and imposed sanctions on some Belarusian officials. EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said the plane incident amounted to a "hijacking." Lithuania told all incoming and outgoing flights to avoid neighboring Belarus, while Ukraine's leader moved to ban Ukrainian flights via the neighbor's airspace.

But Belarus' key ally Russia offered support, arguing that Belarus acted in line with international procedures for bomb threats and saying the West reacted rashly. Russian President Vladimir Putin welcomed Lukashenko for talks days after the incident and nodded in sympathy as Lukashenko fulminated about the EU sanctions, saying the bloc was trying to destabilize his country.

Georgia DA asks for special grand jury in election probe

By KATE BRUMBACK Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — The Georgia prosecutor looking into possible attempts to interfere in the 2020 general election by former President Donald Trump and others has asked for a special grand jury to aid the investigation.

Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis on Thursday sent a letter to Fulton County Superior Court Chief Judge Christopher Brasher asking him to impanel a special grand jury. She wrote in the letter that her office "has received information indicating a reasonable probability that the State of Georgia's administration of elections in 2020, including the State's election of the President of the United States, was subject to possible criminal disruptions."

Willis has declined to speak about the specifics of her investigation, but in an interview with The Associated Press earlier this month she confirmed that its scope includes — but is not limited to — a Jan. 2, 2021, phone call between Trump and Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, a November 2020 phone call between U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham and Raffensperger, the abrupt resignation of the U.S. attorney in Atlanta on Jan. 4, 2021, and comments made during December 2020 Georgia legislative committee hearings on the election.

A Trump spokesman has previously dismissed the investigation as a politically motivated "witch hunt." Graham has also denied any wrongdoing.

In a statement Thursday, Trump said his call to Raffensperger was "perfect."

"I didn't say anything wrong in the call, made while I was President on behalf of the United States of America, to look into the massive voter fraud which took place in Georgia," Trump said. He ended his statement by saying, "No more political witch hunts!"

Federal and state officials have repeatedly said there was no evidence of widespread voter fraud in Georgia or elsewhere in the country during the 2020 election.

An AP investigation into cases of potential voter fraud in Georgia and the five other battleground states where Trump disputed his loss to Democratic President Joe Biden found fewer than 500 cases.

In Georgia, officials identified 64 potential voter fraud cases, representing 0.54% of Biden's margin of victory in the state. Of those, 31 were determined to be the result of an administrative error or some other mistake.

Willis' office has tried to interview multiple witnesses and gather evidence, but some witnesses and prospective witnesses have refused to cooperate without a subpoena, she wrote in the letter to Brasher. For example, Willis wrote in the letter that Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, whom she calls an "essential witness," has "indicated that he will not participate in an interview or otherwise offer evidence until he is presented with a subpoena by my office." A special grand jury would have the power to subpoena witnesses.

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Asked by email whether he would decline to participate without a subpoena, Raffensperger's office did not immediately provide a statement to the AP. But Raffensperger said Thursday afternoon on Fox News that his office has cooperated, sending Willis' team anything they've requested, and that he would follow the law and comply if compelled to appear before a grand jury.

Special grand juries, which are not used often in Georgia, can help in the investigation of complex matters. They do not have the power to return an indictment but can make recommendations to prosecutors on criminal prosecutions.

Willis said the special grand jury is needed because it can serve a term longer than a normal grand jury term. It also would be able to focus on this investigation alone, allowing it to focus on the complex facts and circumstances. And having a special grand jury would mean that the regular seated grand jury wouldn't have to deal with this investigation in addition to their regular duties, Willis wrote.

She also asked that a superior court judge be appointed to assist and supervise the special grand jury in its investigation.

Willis, who took office in January 2021, sent letters to top elected officials in Georgia in February instructing them to preserve any records related to the general election, particularly any evidence of attempts to influence election officials. The probe includes "potential violations of Georgia law prohibiting the solicitation of election fraud, the making of false statements to state and local government bodies, conspiracy, racketeering, violation of oath of office and any involvement in violence or threats related to the election's administration," the letters said.

Willis, a longtime prosecutor, has repeatedly said that she is aware of the intense public interest in her investigation, but she's said she won't be rushed. She told the AP that a decision on whether to seek charges in the case could come in the first half of this year.

In her letter to Brasher, Willis said her office has learned that people who may have tried to influence Georgia's election have had contact with the secretary of state, the state attorney general and the U.S. attorney's office in Atlanta. That means her office is the only one with the authority to investigate these matters that is not also a potential witness, she wrote.

US sanctions Ukrainian officials accused of helping Russia

By AAMER MADHANI and ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. Treasury Department levied new sanctions Thursday against four Ukrainian officials, including two current members of parliament who administration officials say are part of a Russian influence effort to set the pretext for further invasion of Ukraine.

The sanctions name parliament members Taras Kozak and Oleh Voloshyn and two former government officials. According to Treasury, all four have been intimately involved in disinformation efforts by Russia's federal security service, known as the FSB.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the four men were at the heart of a Kremlin effort begun in 2020 "to degrade the ability of the Ukrainian state to independently function."

The new sanctions were announced less than 24 hours after President Joe Biden said he thinks Moscow will newly invade Ukraine. He warned Russian President Vladimir Putin that his country would pay a "dear price" in lives lost and a possible restriction in access to the global banking system if it does.

Biden faced criticism from Republicans and Ukrainian officials that he invited a limited Russian invasion by suggesting in comments to reporters on Wednesday that the U.S. would react with a measured response if there was only a "minor incursion." Administration officials immediately sought to clarify his remarks, and Biden himself did so on Thursday.

"I've been absolutely clear with President Putin," Biden said Thursday. "He has no misunderstanding: any, any assembled Russian units move across the Ukrainian border, that is an invasion."

Biden on Wednesday said his team is looking at possible sanctions against Moscow that would target the Russian banking system, restricting its ability "to deal in dollars." Biden was referring to potentially limiting Russia's access to "dollar clearing" — the conversion of payments by banks on behalf of clients

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into U.S. dollars from rubles or other foreign currency, according to a senior administration official who was not authorized to comment publicly.

Sen. Jeanne Shaheen, a New Hampshire Democrat who co-led a bipartisan congressional delegation to Ukraine last weekend, told reporters Thursday she understood the administration was still analyzing what the impact would be on other countries if Russia were banned from SWIFT, a banking system that handles the flow of money around the world.

Democratic Rep. Elissa Slotkin of Michigan in a Twitter posting urged the administration to take action that makes certain that "Russian oligarchs that support Putin" aren't "able to spend their weekends shopping in Monaco and Paris."

The White House last week warned that Russia has stationed operatives in and around Ukraine possibly to create a pretext for an invasion. U.S. and Ukrainian officials have also been concerned about the Russian weaponizing of disinformation.

"The United States is taking action to expose and counter Russia's dangerous and threatening campaign of influence and disinformation in Ukraine," Deputy Treasury Secretary Wally Adeyemo said in a statement. "We are committed to taking steps to hold Russia accountable for their destabilizing actions."

Kozak, who controls several news channels in Ukraine, is accused of amplifying false narratives about Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's inner circle and the 2020 elections. Voloshyn has worked with Russia's FSB to undermine Ukrainian government officials, Treasury says.

Treasury officials say Voloshyn also worked with Konstantin Kilimnik, a Russian national who was previously sanctioned for allegedly attempting to influence the 2016 U.S. presidential election and passing on information to Russian intelligence.

Treasury also sanctioned Ukraine's former deputy secretary for national security and defense councils, Vladimir Sivkovich. The administration says Sivkovich worked last year with a network of Russian intelligence activists to carry out influence operations that attempted to build support for Ukraine to officially cede Crimea to Russia in exchange for a drawdown of Russian-backed forces. Russian troops seized Crimea in 2014 and Russia then annexed the Black Sea peninsula.

The other former official cited is Volodymyr Oliynyk, who Treasury says worked at the direction of the FSB to gather information about Ukrainian critical infrastructure. Olynyk is currently living in Russia, according to Treasury.

Biden on Thursday noted that Russia "has a long history of using measures other than overt military action to carry out aggression."

After his speculation about a "minor incursion" by Russia, Biden underscored that any invasion would be seen as violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and would result in severe consequences for Russia. Nevertheless, his comments rattled Kyiv.

"We want to remind the great powers that there are no minor incursions and small nations," Zelenskyy tweeted Thursday shortly before the new sanctions were announced. "Just as there are no minor casualties and little grief from the loss of loved ones."

Some 100,000 Russian troops have massed near Ukraine's border. Russian officials are demanding written guarantees that NATO will not expand westward. Members of the alliance refuse to give such a pledge.

EXPLAINER: Why fear of 5G halting flights has faded

By The Associated Press undefined

The rollout of new 5G wireless service in the U.S. failed to have the much-dreaded result of crippling air travel, although it began in rocky fashion, with international airlines canceling some flights to the U.S. and spotty problems showing up on domestic flights.

Airline industry officials say the decision by AT&T and Verizon — under pressure from the White House — to delay activating 5G towers near many airports has defused the situation.

The delay is giving the Federal Aviation Administration more time to clear more planes to operate freely around 5G networks. On Thursday, the FAA said it had granted new approvals that will allow an estimated

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78% of the U.S. airline fleet to make landings even under low-visibility conditions at airports where the new, faster wireless service has been turned on.

That still leaves about one-fifth of the fleet vulnerable to being prevented from landing at some airports during bad weather, but that chunk is certain to shrink. The CEOs of American and United say they don't expect any major disruptions to flights.

Here is a rundown of what happened.

WHAT'S THE CONCERN ALL ABOUT?

Cellphone companies have been rolling out next-generation 5G service for a few years, and this latest slice of it, the so-called C-Band, helps make AT&T and Verizon more competitive with T-Mobile. It promises faster and more stable wireless networks. But 5G is still mostly promise and less actual applications. For now, it lets you download a movie much faster. But the telecommunications industry is touting it as critical for autonomous vehicles, modern manufacturing, smart cities, telehealth and other fields that would rely on a universe of internet-connected devices.

The concern comes from the fact that this latest bit of 5G operates on part of the radio spectrum that is close to the range used by aircraft instruments called radio altimeters, which measure how high aircraft are above the ground.

The issue was highlighted in a 2020 report by RTCA, an aviation research group, prompting pilots and airlines to sound alarms about possible radio interference that could jeopardize safety. The telecom industry, led by trade group CTIA, disputes the 2020 report and says 5G poses no risk to aviation.

WHY DID AIRLINES CANCEL SOME FLIGHTS TO THE U.S. THIS WEEK?

International airlines canceled some flights that were scheduled to operate just as the new networks went live. They feared not being able to land at their destinations under 5G-related restrictions imposed by the FAA.

HOW MANY FLIGHTS?

Airlines canceled more than 350 flights on Wednesday, according to FlightAware. That sounds like a lot, but it's just 2% of all scheduled flights — and it's likely most of them got scrubbed for other reasons. For context, there were nearly 10 times as many cancellations on Jan. 3, when airlines struggled with winter weather and large numbers of employees calling in sick with COVID-19.

IS THE PROBLEM SOLVED?

No, although the FAA says it is making progress by determining that more altimeters are adequately protected against interference from 5G C-Band signals. Planes with certain altimeters might never be approved, which means the operators would likely have to install new equipment to land at all airports.

IS THIS A PROBLEM ONLY IN THE U.S.?

For the most part, yes. The FAA says there are several reasons why the 5G C-Band rollout has been more of a challenge for airlines in the U.S. than in other countries: Cellular towers use a more powerful signal strength than those elsewhere; the 5G network operates on a frequency closer to the one many altimeters use, and cell tower antennae point up at a higher angle. CTIA disputes the FAA's claims.

In France, 5G networks near airports must operate at reduced power to lower the risk of interference with planes.

IS THE 5G ROLLOUT COMPLETE?

No. Verizon and AT&T activated about 90% of their 5G C-Band towers this week but agreed not to turn on those within a 2-mile radius of many airports. The companies still want to activate those towers, but there might not be agreement until the FAA is satisfied that an overwhelming portion of the airline fleet can operate safely around the signals.

WHAT COMPANIES ARE INVOLVED IN THE ISSUE?

Besides the two big telecommunications companies, the list includes aircraft makers Boeing and Airbus and altimeter subcontractors Collins, Honeywell and Thales. Then there are the airlines, whose dire warning this week of widespread flight cancellations added to pressure on the telecommunications companies to delay activating this type of 5G service around airports.

WHOSE SIDE IS THE GOVERNMENT ON?

Both.

The Federal Communications Commission, which conducted the \$80 billion auction that awarded C-Band spectrum to Verizon and AT&T, says there is enough buffer between this slice of 5G and aircraft altimeters for safety. But the FAA and Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg took the airlines' side in the dispute. They asked the telecom companies to delay their rollout around airports.

Some experts say poor coordination and cooperation among the two federal agencies is as much to blame as any technical issues.

WHY DID IT COME TO A CRISIS?

That should not have happened. The FAA and airlines had plenty of notice that C-Band was coming — it's been talked about for years. They say they tried to raise their concerns but were ignored by the FCC.

American Airlines CEO Doug Parker indicated he was happy with the resolution but not the process.

"It wasn't our finest hour, I think, as a country," he said.

US drops case against MIT professor accused of ties to China

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Justice Department dropped charges Thursday against a Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor accused of concealing ties to the Chinese government, a further setback to a federal initiative that was set up to prevent economic espionage and theft by Beijing of trade secrets and academic research.

The department revealed its decision in the case against Gang Chen in a filing in federal court in Boston, saying it could no longer meet its burden of proof.

U.S. Attorney Rachael Rollins, the top federal prosecutor in Massachusetts, said the move was "in the interests of justice" and was the result of new information the government had received about the allegations.

"After a careful assessment of this new information in the context of all the evidence, our office has concluded that we can no longer meet our burden of proof at trial," Rollins said. "As prosecutors, we have an obligation in every matter we pursue to continually examine the facts while being open to receiving and uncovering new information."

The outcome, which had been expected and was earlier recommended by prosecutors in Boston, is a blow to a Justice Department effort known as the China Initiative, which was set up in 2018 to crack down on Chinese economic espionage and trade secret theft. A key prong of the initiative has focused on academics in the U.S. accused of concealing research ties to China on grant applications. But critics have long said the effort unduly targets researchers based on ethnicity and that it chills academic collaboration.

The Justice Department is currently reviewing the future of the program, a process expected to be complete in the coming weeks, said spokesperson Wyn Hornbuckle.

In a statement, Chen thanked his supporters and said he would have more to say soon.

"While I am relieved that my ordeal is over, I am mindful that this terribly misguided China Initiative continues to bring unwarranted fear to the academic community and other scientists still face charges," Chen said.

A mechanical engineering professor, Chen was arrested in January 2021 in the final days of the Trump administration and charged with concealing ties to Beijing while also collecting U.S. dollars for his nanotechnology research.

Prosecutors accused him at the time of entering into undisclosed contracts and appointments with Chinese entities, including acting as an "overseas expert" for the Chinese government at the request of the People's Republic of China Consulate Office in New York. Many of those roles were "expressly intended to further the PRC's scientific and technological goals," authorities in court documents.

He was accused of failing to disclose information about connections to China in an application for an Energy Department grant. Chen's lawyers have consistently said that he did nothing wrong and that he disclosed what he needed to disclose.

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The case began to wobble as the government received new information, including from the Energy Department, a person familiar with the matter said last week.

In a statement Thursday, defense attorney Robert Fisher called the case a "wayward prosecution" and said his client was eager to return to work. He thanked the "many witnesses who came forward and told the government how badly they misunderstood the details surrounding scientific and academic collaboration."

"Our defense was this: Gang did not commit any of the offenses he was charged with. Full stop. He was never in a talent program. He was never an overseas scientist for Beijing. He disclosed everything he was supposed to disclose and he never lied to the government or anyone else," Fisher said in a statement.

Many of the China Initiative cases against academics and professors have centered on false statement or fraud allegations, rather than accusations of espionage or passing along academic research or technical or scientific expertise to China.

The initiative has resulted in some significant guilty pleas and convictions, and did score a high-profile win last month with the conviction of a Harvard University professor on charges that he hid his ties to a Chinese-run recruitment program.

But other big cases brought as part of the China Initiative have faltered.

A federal judge in September, for instance, threw out all charges against a University of Tennessee professor accused of hiding his relationship with a Chinese university while receiving research grants from NASA, and the university has since offered to reinstate him.

Critics of the China Initiative have called for the Justice Department to shut the program down. The department's top national security official, Matthew Olsen, met Wednesday with members of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus, who expressed their concerns.

Andrew Lelling, who was U.S. attorney in Boston when Chen was charged, wrote in a LinkedIn post several weeks ago that the China Initiative was created in response to "concerns about economic espionage involving an emerging political rival."

Now, he wrote, the "initiative has drifted, and in some significant ways, lost its focus. DOJ should revamp, and shut down, parts of the program, to avoid needlessly chilling scientific and business collaborations with Chinese partners."

Supreme Court won't speed challenge to Texas abortion limits

WASHINGTON (AP) — In the latest setback for abortion rights in Texas, the Supreme Court on Thursday refused to speed up the ongoing court case over the state's ban on most abortions.

Over dissents from the three liberal justices, the court declined to order a federal appeals court to return the case to a federal judge who had temporarily blocked the law's enforcement. The court offered no explanation for its action.

The Texas ban is thus likely to remain in effect for the foreseeable future, following a decision by the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans to send the case to the Texas Supreme Court, which is entirely controlled by Republican justices and does not have to act immediately.

Abortion providers had asked the high court to countermand the appellate order, which they said in court papers has no purpose other than to delay legal proceedings and prevent clinics from offering abortions beyond around six weeks of pregnancy.

The law has devastated abortion care in Texas, Justice Sonia Sotomayor wrote. "Instead of stopping a Fifth Circuit panel from indulging Texas' newest delay tactics, the Court allows the State yet again to extend the deprivation of the federal constitutional rights of its citizens through procedural manipulation," Sotomayor wrote, joined by Justices Stephen Breyer and Elena Kagan. "The Court may look the other way, but I cannot."

Chief Justice John Roberts joined the three liberals in December in a dissent that called for allowing a broader challenge to the law and a quick return to the lower federal court. Roberts did not note his position on Thursday.

Clinics fear that their challenge to the law might not be resolved before the justices rule in a Mississippi

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case that could roll back abortion rights across the country. That decision, which could overrule the landmark Roe v. Wade case from 1973, is expected by late June.

The Texas law that bans abortion once cardiac activity is detected — usually around six weeks, before some women know they are pregnant — has been in effect since September. Last month, the high court kept the law in place and allowed only a narrow challenge against the restrictions to proceed.

The providers thought their best chance for a favorable outcome was before U.S. District Judge Robert Pitman in Austin. Pitman issued an order in October blocking the law, though the appeals court put his ruling on hold just a couple of days later.

At 113, NAACP evolves for relevance on racial justice agenda

By AARON MORRISON Associated Press

As the NAACP turns 113, look for its voice to grow louder on issues like climate change, the student debt crisis and the ongoing response to the coronavirus pandemic — while keeping voting rights and criminal justice reform at the forefront of its priorities.

The nation's oldest civil rights organization's birthday next month comes as it undergoes a restructuring to reflect a membership and leadership that is trending younger, to people in their mid-30s. As a result, it is adding endeavors like producing TV streaming content for CBS.

The hope is that younger Americans see the NAACP has modernized beyond being grandma and grandpa's go-to civil rights hub, good for much more than voter-registration drives and the star-studded Image Awards.

"We had to reinvigorate the organization," national president Derrick Johnson, 53, told The Associated Press.

"The changes that we have seen are absolutely necessary for the organization to exist for the next 112 or 113 years," he added. "But more importantly, we are more targeted in our work and are driven by outcomes as opposed to output."

The NAACP's legacy includes the legal desegregation of schools and workplaces, crusades against lynching and racial terrorism, and pursuit of socioeconomic advancement for Black Americans. It commands the respect of U.S. presidents and Capitol Hill powerbrokers, confers with U.N. diplomats on global issues and trains future leaders through its network of thousands of state and local branches.

But in periods of NAACP history when it found itself embroiled in financial hardship and internal power struggles, the group appeared ineffective or even irrelevant. Past critics have said the NAACP was insular, too concerned with corporate funding, and not nearly nimble or progressive enough for the times.

"The best of the NAACP is when it fought for change, not as payback for Black people voting for a candidate, but because the change was demanded by the promises of the constitution, the demands of human rights and the sound morality of our deepest religious traditions," said the Rev. William Barber II, who led the North Carolina NAACP from 2006 to 2017 before resigning to become co-chair of the Poor People's Campaign.

"Right now, the NAACP should be leaning to its better history," Barber told the AP.

A revamped "brain trust" within its leadership is helping to better meet the needs of its membership, said NAACP chief strategy officer Yumeka Rushing. During a December national staff retreat, roughly half of those in attendance had come onboard in the prior 12 months.

"There is not another organization like us, in terms of the footprint that we have around the country," Rushing said. "The restructuring happened at a time when the country needed us the most, to stand up and speak to the issues."

Johnson said there is no issue more important to the NAACP than the fight to enhance voter protections. With the Senate missing this week's Martin Luther King Jr. Day deadline to pass Democrat-backed legislation, the NAACP president issued a grave warning to lawmakers of both parties.

"Anything short of protecting the right to vote is a death sentence for democracy. The fight is far from over," Johnson said after a Wednesday night Senate vote.

Johnson told the AP the organization's strategy on voting rights isn't just about preserving Black voters' influence in national elections. Following the release of 2020 census data, the NAACP has filed lawsuits

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against state redistricting plans in Texas, Georgia and Illinois that would limit voters' choices in elections. "It's more about having a true representative democracy," he said.

Until about a decade ago, it had been easier to find bipartisan support for voter protection measures. In a 2006 speech to the NAACP's national convention in Washington, former Republican President George W. Bush affirmed his support for Congress' reauthorization of the landmark Voting Rights Act of 1965.

"President (Lyndon) Johnson called the right to vote the lifeblood of our democracy," Bush said. "That was true then, and it remains true today."

Paris Dennard, a spokesman for the Republican National Committee, said the NAACP and the GOP have historically been aligned on several civil rights issues, including criminal justice reform, election integrity and financial support for historically Black colleges and universities.

"The NAACP is supposed to be nonpartisan, so we're always seeking areas of alignment on a host of issues," Dennard said.

Founded on Feb. 12, 1909, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was formed as the nation struggled to build a post-abolition multiracial democracy amid violence against Black people. Its white founders, a group of activists and journalists that included Henry Moskowitz, Mary White Ovington and William English Walling, joined with like-minded Black activists — W. E. B. Du Bois, Mary Church Terrell and Ida B. Wells, the noted journalist who investigated lynching in America.

The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, founded as a part of the NAACP in 1940, litigated the landmark Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* mandating the desegregation of public schools in 1954, as well as a case permitting affirmative action in college admissions decades later. In 1957, the NAACP LDF became a separate entity.

Today, the NAACP has more than 2,200 branches, including in colleges and prisons, and 2.2 million members. Even amid the rise in popularity of the Black Lives Matter movement, youth membership jumped significantly from 12,000 in 2019 to more than 17,000 by the end of 2020, according to Wisdom Cole, the NAACP's youth and college division director.

"The NAACP continues to be the preeminent civil rights organization in the country," said Randal Maurice Jelks, professor of African and African-American studies at the University of Kansas. "It set up a bureaucracy to be able to handle the ongoing, critical changes that we face."

When other organizations have burned out, the NAACP is well positioned to endure, Jelks said. "And that is to the credit of its initial organizers."

The NAACP operates two c3 nonprofits and two c4 nonprofits, as well as a for-profit arm. Its Hollywood bureau pursues representation and equity issues across the entertainment industry, while its legislative and policy bureau in Washington lobbies lawmakers on NAACP priorities. A full service law firm, staffed with seven attorneys, works with a network of lawyers across the country, allowing the organization to litigate between 30 and 50 cases at any given time.

With tens of millions of dollars in assets across its entities as of 2020, Johnson said the NAACP's finances are healthier than at any time in its existence.

Johnson said his involvement with the NAACP began in 1990. Until his 2017 appointment as president and CEO, he volunteered in his home state of Mississippi in a number of capacities, including as state conference president.

His elevation to leadership has not been without challenges. In 2020, a former North Carolina NAACP official filed a \$15 million lawsuit against the national organization after she accused her boss of sexual harassment and NAACP leadership of inaction.

The NAACP declined comment citing the ongoing litigation.

Johnson told the AP he has grown as a leader by relying on the wisdom of the organization's elders and the counsel of its young people.

"I have been able to apply lessons learned, good and bad," Johnson said. "As I navigate in this moment, I see the relationships built over time are now coming full circle."

He has fans within the Biden administration. President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris are

longstanding NAACP members who “work closely with the organization to advance their shared commitment to equal rights,” a White House official said.

Housing and Urban Development Secretary Marcia Fudge, also a lifetime NAACP member, credits Johnson’s leadership for the group’s continued influence in national policy debates.

“If he doesn’t have a seat at the table, he brings one,” Fudge told the AP. “He makes himself relevant by going to the tables where he may not have been invited.”

Europe considers new COVID-19 strategy: Accepting the virus

By ARITZ PARRA Associated Press

MADRID (AP) — When the coronavirus pandemic was first declared, Spaniards were ordered to stay home for more than three months. For weeks, they were not allowed outside even for exercise. Children were banned from playgrounds, and the economy virtually stopped.

But officials credited the draconian measures with preventing a full collapse of the health system. Lives were saved, they argued.

Now, almost two years later, Spain is preparing to adopt a different COVID-19 playbook. With one of Europe’s highest vaccination rates and its most pandemic-battered economies, the government is laying the groundwork to treat the next infection surge not as an emergency but an illness that is here to stay. Similar steps are under consideration in neighboring Portugal and in Britain.

The idea is to move from crisis mode to control mode, approaching the virus in much the same way countries deal with flu or measles. That means accepting that infections will occur and providing extra care for at-risk people and patients with complications.

Spain’s center-left prime minister, Pedro Sánchez, wants the European Union to consider similar changes now that the surge of the omicron variant has shown that the disease is becoming less lethal.

“What we are saying is that in the next few months and years, we are going to have to think, without hesitancy and according to what science tells us, how to manage the pandemic with different parameters,” he said Monday.

Sánchez said the changes should not happen before the omicron surge is over, but officials need to start shaping the post-pandemic world now: “We are doing our homework, anticipating scenarios.”

The World Health Organization has said that it’s too early to consider any immediate shift. The organization does not have clearly defined criteria for declaring COVID-19 an endemic disease, but its experts have previously said that it will happen when the virus is more predictable and there are no sustained outbreaks.

“It’s somewhat a subjective judgment because it’s not just about the number of cases. It’s about severity, and it’s about impact,” said Dr. Michael Ryan, the WHO’s emergencies chief.

Speaking at a World Economic Forum panel on Monday, Dr. Anthony Fauci, the top infectious diseases doctor in the U.S., said COVID-19 could not be considered endemic until it drops to “a level that it doesn’t disrupt society.”

The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control has advised countries to transition to more routine handling of COVID-19 after the acute phase of the pandemic is over. The agency said in a statement that more EU states in addition to Spain will want to adopt “a more long-term, sustainable surveillance approach.”

Just over 80% of Spain’s population has received two vaccine doses, and authorities are focused on boosting the immunity of adults with third doses.

Vaccine-acquired immunity, coupled with widespread infection, offers a chance to concentrate prevention efforts, testing and illness-tracking resources on moderate- to high-risk groups, said Dr. Salvador Trenche, head of the Spanish Society of Family and Community Medicine, which has led the call for a new endemic response.

COVID-19 “must be treated like the rest of illnesses,” Trenche told The Associated Press, adding that “normalized attention” by health professionals would help reduce delays in treatment of problems not related to the coronavirus.

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The public also needs to come to terms with the idea that some deaths from COVID-19 “will be inevitable,” Tranche said.

“We can’t do on the sixth wave what we were doing on the first one: The model needs to change if we want to achieve different results,” he said.

The Spanish Health Ministry said it was too early to share any blueprints being drafted by its experts and advisers, but the agency confirmed that one proposal is to follow an existing model of “sentinel surveillance” currently used in the EU for monitoring flu.

The strategy has been nicknamed “flu-ization” of COVID-19 by Spanish media, although officials say that the systems for influenza will need to be adapted significantly to the coronavirus.

For now, the discussion about moving to an endemic approach is limited to wealthy nations that can afford to speak about the worst of the pandemic in the past tense. Their access to vaccines and robust public health systems are the envy of the developing world.

It’s also not clear how an endemic strategy would coexist with the “zero-Covid” approach adopted by China and other Asian countries, and how would that affect international travel.

Many countries overwhelmed by the record number of omicron cases are already giving up on massive testing and cutting quarantine times, especially for workers who show no more than cold-like symptoms. Since the beginning of the year, classes in Spanish schools stop only if major outbreaks occur, not with the first reported case as they used to.

In Portugal, with one of the world’s highest vaccination rates, President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa declared in a New Year’s speech that the country had “moved into an endemic phase.” But the debate over specific measures petered out as the spread soon accelerated to record levels — almost 44,000 new cases in 24 hours reported Tuesday.

However, hospital admissions and deaths in the vaccinated world are proportionally much lower than in previous surges.

In the United Kingdom, mask-wearing in public places and COVID-19 passports will be dropped on Jan. 26, Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced Wednesday saying that the latest wave had “peaked nationally.”

The requirement for infected people to isolate for five full days remains in place, but Johnson said he will seek to scrap it in coming weeks if the virus data continues to improve. Official statistics put at 95% the share of the British population that has developed antibodies against COVID-19 either from infection or vaccination.

“As COVID becomes endemic, we will need to replace legal requirements with advice and guidance, urging people with the virus to be careful and considerate of others,” Johnson said.

For some other European governments, the idea of normalizing COVID-19 is at odds with their efforts to boost vaccination among reluctant groups.

In Germany, where less than 73% of the population has received two doses and infection rates are hitting new records almost daily, comparisons to Spain or any other country are being rejected.

“We still have too many unvaccinated people, particularly among our older citizens,” Health Ministry spokesman Andreas Deffner said Monday.

Italy is extending its vaccination mandate to all citizens age 50 or older and imposing fines of up to 1,500 euros for unvaccinated people who show up at work. Italians are also required to be fully vaccinated to access public transportation, planes, gyms, hotels and trade fairs.

EXPLAINER: How will U. of Michigan assault settlement work?

By ED WHITE Associated Press

DETROIT (AP) — A \$490 million deal to settle claims of sexual assault against a University of Michigan doctor will be handled in a similar way to the \$500 million agreement worked out in 2018 by Michigan State University and the victims of Larry Nassar.

The school won’t have a role in how the money is divided. Rather a retired judge, maybe two, will be presented with individual claims and determine a figure, attorneys said.

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Simple math pegs an average payment of more than \$400,000 for each of the 1,050 people — most of them men — though some could be higher or lower, depending on the impact of Robert Anderson's abuse.

"Everybody is not going to be the same," attorney Jamie White said. "These men were not out for money. Most of them are established U. of M. graduates. This was more about holding the university accountable."

WHAT HAPPENED?

Former students and athletes at U-M said Anderson molested them during exams. He was a campus doctor for 37 years, especially in the athletic department, before retiring in 2003 and also gave physicals to people in the aviation industry. He died in 2008.

The allegations about Anderson emerged in 2018 when a wrestler from the 1970s wrote a letter to the athletic director, who referred it to police. A subsequent investigation found that complaints about Anderson were lodged multiple times years earlier, yet no one at the university got rid of him.

THE SCHOOL'S RESPONSE

When lawsuits were filed in 2020, U-M lawyers said the allegations were too old and violated Michigan's time limit on filing personal-injury cases. But outside court, the university acknowledged that assaults occurred and expressed a willingness to reach an agreement with the growing pool of victims.

"We hope this settlement will begin the healing process for survivors," Jordan Acker, chairman of the school's governing board, said Wednesday.

COMPARISONS WITH NASSAR

Nassar molested Michigan State female athletes, U.S. Olympic gymnasts and young gymnasts who trained in the Lansing, Michigan, area. He pleaded guilty in 2017 and is serving decades in prison. Michigan State was accused of ignoring or dismissing complaints against him.

Michigan State's \$500 million settlement was larger though it involved fewer victims, approximately 520, than in the Anderson scandal. Many were under 18 when Nassar assaulted them.

"There were scores of women who came forward with impact statements in court," attorney Megan Bonanni said. "It really became a story that captured the attention of our entire country because of the criminal prosecution. That factored in as well."

The agreement between U-M and Anderson's victims still needs the blessing of U.S. District Judge Victoria Roberts. Payments could begin by summer, predicted John Manly, an attorney for the men.

"This is a just result," said Manly, who was involved in the talks. "The reason this case settled isn't because of the largesse of the University of Michigan. This case settled because of the survivors' stories and a judge who pressed both sides to resolve it."

Cuban protesters await sentencing, facing long prison terms

By ANDREA RODRÍGUEZ Associated Press

HAVANA (AP) — Cuban courts have wrapped up the hearing phase of six mass trials for people accused of involvement in the largest and most unruly protests on the island in decades, leaving more than 100 defendants awaiting potentially heavy sentences.

Relatives of defendants and activists following the trials in several cities across the island — the last of which concluded this week — said prosecutors were seeking sentences of up to 30 years in prison for crimes including sedition, public disorder and attacks. No date has been announced for sentencing.

Thousands of Cubans took to the street in several cities on July 11 and 12 to protest shortages of goods, power blackouts and economic hardship — with some also calling for a change in government.

At least one person died and several shops and vehicles were vandalized or burned. Officials have not said how many people were detained, but the organization Justice 11J, created to track the cases, has registered 1,300 arrests and said more than 400 so far have been tried.

Officials said in August that there had been 23 summary trials of 67 defendants on lesser charges.

Groups such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International accused the government of responding to mostly peaceful protests with arbitrary arrests and crackdowns meant to silence dissent, which the government disputes.

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The extended Román family accounted for at least six of the arrested following the July 12 protests in Havana's La Guinera neighborhood in which one demonstrator died. All were detained at the same home two days after the protests.

None of them had previous problems with authorities, according to María Carla Milán, the wife of Yosney Román, who faces a possible 20-year sentence.

Yosney, a 25-year-old laborer, and his 18-year-old brother Emiyoslán were defendants in one of the Havana trials, while their sister Mackyanis, 24, has not yet been given a court date.

Three cousins also were detained, one of them among the current defendants. Another of the cousins, Odlanier Rodríguez, was freed after 22 days in prison after being fined the equivalent of \$83.

During the most recent trial, the defendants "recognized that it was a mistake to have thrown rocks at the police," said Milán, who attended the hearing. "They repented what they had done. They got caught up in the excitement. They don't have any criminal record and they aren't criminals. They had never had problems before."

"But they are very young," she added. "This number of years (sought by prosecutors) is an abuse."

Many of the protesters had no previous record of political activism and there appeared to be no clear leadership of the protests, though the government has accused U.S.-based opposition groups of trying to organize demonstrations with a social media campaign.

The father of the Román siblings, Emilio Román, said none of the six members of the family had any political involvement.

"I had never seen anything like that (demonstration)," said Rodríguez, the cousin. "I stopped on the corner to watch."

He said it seemed to him that people joined in because they were tired of long lines and shortages of food.

Cuban authorities acknowledged that some complaints were justified and President Miguel Díaz-Canel visited La Guinera, where officials promised additional social programs in the wake of the protests.

Salomé García, an activist with Justice 11J, said the trials were meant to be "exemplary" since only a small percentage of the protesters face severe charges.

He said that charges of sedition were applied in La Guinera, where there were no cases of looting, while no such charges were lodged in the central province of Matanzas, where there were cases of patrol cars overturned.

Austrian parliament approves vaccine mandate for adults

By EMILY SCHULTHEIS and GEIR MOULSON Associated Press

VIENNA (AP) — Austria's parliament voted Thursday to introduce a COVID-19 vaccine mandate for adults from Feb. 1, the first of its kind in Europe, with maximum potential fines of up to 3,600 euros (\$4,000) for people who don't comply after a series of reminders.

Lawmakers voted 137 to 33 in favor of the measure, which will apply to all residents of Austria aged 18 and over. Exemptions are made for pregnant women, people who for medical reasons can't be vaccinated, or who have recovered from the coronavirus in the previous six months.

Officials say the mandate is necessary because vaccination rates remain too low in the small Alpine country. They say it will ensure that Austria's hospitals are not overwhelmed with COVID-19 patients.

Health Minister Wolfgang Mueckstein, speaking in parliament Thursday afternoon, called the measure a "big, and, for the first time, also lasting step" in Austria's fight against the pandemic.

"This is how we can manage to escape the cycle of opening and closing, of lockdowns," he said, noting that it's about fighting not just omicron, but any future variants that might emerge. "That is why this law is so urgently needed right now."

The Austrian government first announced the plan for a universal vaccine mandate at the same time it imposed a since-lifted lockdown in November, and amid concern that Austria's vaccination rate was comparatively low for Western Europe. As of Thursday, about 72% of the population of 8.9 million was considered fully vaccinated.

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The measure passed easily in parliament after a fierce debate. Chancellor Karl Nehammer's governing coalition, made up of his conservative Austrian People's Party and the Greens, worked with two of the three opposition parties in parliament on the plan. The far-right Freedom Party vehemently opposed it.

"I'm appalled, I'm stunned, I'm shaken and I'm shocked," said Freedom Party leader Herbert Kickl, calling the law "nothing more than a huge blow to the freedoms of Austrians."

Speakers from the four other parties criticized what they said were the Freedom Party's deliberate attempts to stoke anti-vaccine sentiments in Austria, accusing it of spreading deliberate falsehoods about the safety and effectiveness of available vaccines.

Pamela Rendi-Wagner, head of the opposition Social Democrats, said the vaccine mandate is something "that we all didn't want," but that it "has unfortunately become necessary to close this vaccination gap that still exists in Austria."

Once the mandate goes into effect in February, authorities will write to every household to inform them of the new rules.

From mid-March, police will start checking people's vaccination status during routine checks; people who can't produce proof of vaccination will be asked in writing to do so, and will be fined up to 600 euros (\$685) if they don't.

If authorities judge the country's vaccination progress still to be insufficient, Nehammer said they would then send reminders to people who remain unvaccinated. If even that doesn't work, people would be sent a vaccination appointment and fined if they don't keep it. Officials hope they won't need to use the last measure. Fines could reach 3,600 euros if people contest their punishment and full proceedings are opened.

Austria's governing coalition also announced Thursday that 1.4 billion euros (\$1.59 billion) will be invested in efforts and incentives to encourage unvaccinated people to get the jab. Of that sum, 1 billion euros will go toward a national vaccine lottery beginning March 15, while the remaining 400 million euros will be directed to towns that reach a certain high vaccination rate.

The mandate is supposed to remain in place until the end of January 2024. An expert commission will report to the government and parliament every three months on vaccination progress.

The government originally intended for the mandate to apply to all residents 14 and over, but changed that to 18 during consultations with political opponents and others.

Since the vaccine mandate was initially announced, the measure has led to regular large-scale demonstrations in Vienna, some of which have drawn upwards of 40,000 protesters. Like other protests against coronavirus measures across Europe, the Vienna demonstrations have drawn vaccine skeptics and right-wing extremists alike, and officials have warned that the protests are radicalizing.

Some other European countries have introduced vaccine mandates for specific professional or age groups. Greece, for example, makes COVID-19 vaccination obligatory for everyone aged 60 and over, as that age group accounts for the majority of deaths and hospitalizations in intensive care units.

Austria's neighbor Germany is considering a mandate for all, but it's not yet clear whether, when and in what form that will go ahead.

First aid flights arrive in Tonga after big volcano eruption

By NICK PERRY Associated Press

WELLINGTON, New Zealand (AP) — The first flights carrying fresh water and other aid to Tonga finally arrived Thursday after the Pacific nation's main airport runway was cleared of ash left by a huge volcanic eruption.

New Zealand and Australia each sent military transport planes that were carrying water containers, kits for temporary shelters, generators, hygiene supplies and communications equipment. The Australian plane also had a special sweeper to help keep the runway clear.

The deliveries were dropped off without the military personnel coming in contact with people at the airport in Tonga. That's because Tonga is desperate to make sure foreigners don't bring in the coronavirus. It has not had any outbreaks of COVID-19 and has reported just a single case since the pandemic began.

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Rear Adm. James Gilmour, the commander of New Zealand's Joint Forces, said there had been a "mammoth effort" by Tongan troops "to clear that runway by hand. And they've achieved that this afternoon."

Australia said the assistance would help Tonga's government meet the community's needs and support the immediate cleanup efforts.

Japan also said it is sending emergency relief, including drinking water and equipment for cleaning away volcanic ash. Two C-130 Hercules aircraft left Thursday evening, and a transport vessel carrying two CH-47 Chinook helicopters will depart as soon as it is ready, the Defense Ministry said.

Defense Minister Nobuo Kishi told reporters that his ministry "will do everything we can for the disaster-hit people of Tonga."

U.N. humanitarian officials report that about 84,000 people — more than 80% of Tonga's population — have been impacted by the volcano's eruption, U.N. spokesman Stéphane Dujarric said, pointing to three deaths, injuries, loss of homes and polluted water.

Communications with Tonga remain limited after Saturday's eruption and tsunami appeared to have broken the single fiber-optic cable that connects Tonga with the rest of the world. That means most people haven't been able to use the internet or make phone calls abroad, although some local phone networks are still working.

One phone company, Digicel, said Thursday it had managed to restore the ability to make international calls from some places by using a satellite link, but that people would need to be patient due to high demand. It said it hoped to enhance its service over the coming days.

A navy patrol ship from New Zealand is also expected to arrive later Thursday. It is carrying hydrographic equipment and divers, and also has a helicopter to assist with delivering supplies.

Officials said the ship's first task would be to check shipping channels and the structural integrity of the wharf in the capital, Nuku'alofa, following the eruption and tsunami.

Another New Zealand navy ship carrying 250,000 liters (66,000 gallons) of water is on its way. The ship can also produce tens of thousands of liters of fresh water each day using a desalination plant.

Three of Tonga's smaller islands suffered serious damage from tsunami waves, officials and the Red Cross said.

The U.N.'s Dujarric said "all houses have apparently been destroyed on the island of Mango and only two houses remain on Fonoifua island, with extensive damage reported on Nomuka." He said evacuations are underway for people from the islands.

According to Tongan census figures, Mango is home to 36 people, Fonoifua is home to 69 people, and Nomuka to 239. The majority of Tongans live on the main island of Tongatapu, where about 50 homes were destroyed.

Dujarric said the most pressing humanitarian needs are safe water, food and non-food items, and top priorities are reestablishing communication services including for international calls and the internet.

Tonga has so far avoided the widespread devastation that many initially feared.

UN: Food aid in Ethiopia's Tigray now at 'all-time lowest'

NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) — The United Nations says food distribution in Ethiopia's blockaded Tigray region has reached its "all-time lowest" while more than 50,000 children are thought to be severely malnourished, the latest sign of growing crisis amid efforts to end the country's 14-month war.

Thursday's update by the U.N. humanitarian agency says food aid stocks and fuel are "almost entirely exhausted" in the region of some 6 million people, where a government blockade was imposed in late June 2021 to keep supplies from reaching Tigray forces battling Ethiopian and allied troops.

Conditions under the blockade have become so dire that the International Committee of the Red Cross in a statement this week said some doctors in Tigray are now using salt to clean wounds, handing out expired medications and reusing single-use items such as chest drains and gloves.

The war also has affected Ethiopia's neighboring regions of Amhara and Afar, where rebuilding has begun after Tigray forces retreated back into their region in late December under a drone-supported military

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offensive. The U.N. update says more than a half-million people in Amhara received food assistance during the week ending Jan. 12.

During that time, food aid reached only about 10,000 people in Tigray, the U.N. said.

The recent shift in the war, and talk of national dialogue, was seen as an opening for further mediation efforts and new U.S. special envoy David Satterfield was in Ethiopia on Thursday to meet with senior officials.

On Wednesday, United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres after a call with the African Union envoy leading mediation efforts said he was delighted to hear "there is now a demonstrable effort to make peace" in Ethiopia, but neither he nor envoy Olusegun Obasanjo's spokesman gave details.

Fighting continues. Several drone strikes have killed scores of civilians in Tigray in recent weeks.

When asked why Ethiopia's military didn't pursue the Tigray forces into their region when they retreated, an army general on Thursday told the state-affiliated Fana Broadcasting Corporate that Ethiopia has concluded part one in the war "and that, by definition, means there will be part two." Gen. Abebaw Tadesse added that "we will go there and discard the enemy. ... It's just a matter of time."

The war's combatants also include soldiers from neighboring Eritrea, who are allied with Ethiopian forces and blamed by witnesses for some of the worst atrocities in the war, as well as fighters from Amhara who now occupy western Tigray.

In light of Eritrea's involvement, "any possibility of ending the war through a negotiated settlement goes directly through Asmara," Eritrea's capital, the leader of the Tigray forces, Debretsion Gebremichael, wrote Thursday in The Africa Report.

Aiming to make CDC nimble, agency director has rankled many

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — From the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the top U.S. public health agency has been criticized as too slow to collect and act on new information.

Now, increasingly, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is also being criticized for moving too fast.

One year into Dr. Rochelle Walensky's tenure as director, her bid to make the CDC more agile is being challenged by political pressures, vocal scientists and the changing virus itself. In its haste, some experts say, the agency has repeatedly stumbled — moving too quickly, before the science was clear, and then failing to communicate clearly with local health officials and the public.

"I think they are absolutely trying to be more nimble — and that's a good thing. I don't criticize that," said Dr. Georges Benjamin, executive director of the American Public Health Association. "I criticize the fact that when you're doing this quickly, in an evolving environment, you can't just put it out there and think that people understand it."

Walensky has said that she came to the CDC thinking about ways to speed data collection and reporting. She once told The Associated Press that she didn't want the agency to spend months gathering data that gets published after it's useful. "Like, no one will care," she said.

Speaking to the AP last week, she said she was proud of what the agency had accomplished in the past year. Her examples included a torrent of CDC scientific reports, rapid identification of concerning vaccine side effects and quick research into new variants.

Among her particular points of pride: Last spring, the CDC was quick to investigate and report on rare but concerning side effects in some vaccine recipients, including an unusual blood clot in young women who had received Johnson & Johnson shots. The identification of about 15 cases — out of more than 8 million people who had gotten the vaccine — led the government to pause the dispensing of J&J shots for 11 days.

"Everyone has said that during a pandemic, CDC has to move faster," she said. "I think we really did that."

Her efforts, though, have sometimes gone awry:

— The agency's decision late last month to shorten isolation and quarantine caught many by surprise. Public confusion included questions such as whether the guidance applied to children and why people

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didn't need to test negative before going back to their jobs.

— The CDC briefly overstated the omicron variant's penetration in the U.S. In mid-December, the agency estimated 73% of the previous week's coronavirus infections were due to omicron. A week later, the CDC shaved it to 23%, based on additional data. (The CDC turned out to be a week early: Omicron now reigns.)

— Last spring, Walensky said fully vaccinated people could stop wearing masks in many settings, only to reverse course as the then-new delta variant spread.

Walensky has many defenders. They say that in most cases, core decisions made sense at the time they were made. The real problem, they say, was with how they were rolled out and communicated.

'WE NEED TO DO AN OVERHAUL'

The CDC has long been considered the crown jewel of U.S. public health, with great minds working to investigate illness and coordinate national efforts to prevent it. But it also has been repeatedly criticized as timid and slow in a crisis.

Much of the problem has been lack of funding and governmental authority, said Shelley Hearne, a John Hopkins University professor of health policy and management. She noted, for example, that the CDC can't require doctors or states to report disease case counts or other vital information.

Walensky is not going to change that, Hearne said.

"If the pandemic has shown anything, it's that we need to do an overhaul of how we protect our health," she said.

Compounding the problem is pressure on the CDC from both Republican and Democratic administrations to speak in harmony with the White House. That's not new, but there is now more second-guessing by other scientists and public health experts on social media.

And then there's the general fracturing of the nation.

Some politicians and others have repeatedly undermined the CDC's message, said Benjamin, of the American Public Health Association. CDC directors "didn't have this kind of mischief going on in the past," he said.

TOO SLOW

Early in 2020, the CDC was slow to send out test kits to help state labs identify the earliest coronavirus infections. The agency's kits had a design flaw and were contaminated.

CDC officials were initially focused on the risk of infections spreading from China and were slow to understand how much coronavirus was coming from Europe.

The agency also was criticized for being too slow to recommend people wear masks, to recognize that the virus can spread through the air and to ramp up systematic testing to detect new variants.

In 2020, the Trump administration was accused of political interference for working to control CDC messaging that might contradict the White House's portrayal of how the crisis was unfolding.

Walensky, an infectious-disease specialist known for her communications skills, vowed to restore public trust under President Joe Biden.

This week marks Walensky's anniversary as CDC director, and the agency is still criticized as slow at times.

For example, the CDC last week updated its website to acknowledge N95 masks are more protective than other types and the better choice for most people — something that has long been obvious to scientists.

"So why has its guidance come out late time & time again?" Lawrence Gostin, a Georgetown University public health law expert, asked on Twitter.

On Wednesday, Biden defended the CDC, saying: "The messages, to the extent they've been confusing — it's because the scientists, they're learning more."

TOO FAST

Public health experts note the fast-changing pandemic has forced the CDC to reverse decisions that made sense at one point but later became problematic.

One example: For much of the pandemic, the CDC had advised Americans to wear masks when near others. But last spring, Walensky changed the guidance, saying fully vaccinated people could stop covering up in most settings.

Walensky said the decision was driven by rising vaccination numbers and declines in COVID-19 cases,

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hospitalizations and deaths. Her call was characterized as a sensible incentive to get more people vaccinated. "If we had not followed the science (at the time), and said masks need to stay on, I think we would have lost credibility," she said last week.

Still, the change surprised senior administration officials and some medical experts, who called it premature.

Within weeks, the delta variant triggered a new virus wave. A Massachusetts outbreak in July demonstrated the variant's ability to spread among vaccinated people, so Walensky recommended the vaccinated return to wearing masks in places where delta was fueling infections.

"We saw data on a Friday from Barnstable County," she said. "We had new guidance out on (the following) Tuesday."

Even public health leaders who voice strong support for Walensky have lamented how some CDC recommendations are communicated — without background briefings or documents that fully detail the scientific evidence.

In some instances, local health officials have learned about guidance changes through news reports, and then struggled to incorporate them, said Adriane Casalotti of the National Association of County and City Health Officials.

The CDC has become cautious about briefing others beforehand because such information has repeatedly been leaked to the media, said one agency official, who was not authorized to discuss the matter and spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity.

But that has created another kind of problem.

Last month, the agency cut the recommended isolation period for Americans with the coronavirus from 10 to five days, provided they have no symptoms. With no warning of the change, states scrambled for additional detail.

"We had a one-page media release" and a lot of unanswered questions, said Dr. Natasha Bagdasarian, Michigan's chief medical executive, explaining why the state delayed adopting the CDC recommendations.

Walensky acknowledged the recommendations were rushed, but insisted it was for good reason.

The agency had already decided the change was warranted, given research showing infectiousness was reduced after five days, she said. But Walensky felt she had to react to mounting reports that health care facilities and other businesses were struggling to maintain staffing amid omicron's surge.

With forecasts that infections were going to explode, "we needed to act quickly, given what we were about to face," she said.

Some observers say the CDC is in a can't-win situation: It is criticized when it waits for medical evidence to accumulate, and criticized when it acts quickly on scant data.

Hearne sympathizes.

"No one is used to watching a learning curve like this," she said. "This isn't normal."

Judges didn't consider 'wisdom' of deporting Novak Djokovic

By JOHN PYE and ROD MCGUIRK Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia (AP) — Three Australian Federal Court judges on Thursday revealed their reasons for backing a government order to deport tennis star Novak Djokovic, explaining they did not consider the "merits or wisdom of the decision."

The judges on Sunday unanimously endorsed Immigration Minister Alex Hawke's decision to deport the 34-year-old Serb following an urgent court challenge on the eve of what was to be Djokovic's first match in defense of his Australian Open title. Djokovic accepted the verdict and flew from Melbourne to the United Arab Emirates hours later.

Chief Justice James Allsop and Justices James Besanko and David O'Callaghan on Thursday released a 27-page explanation of why they rejected Djokovic's challenge.

"The court does not consider the merits or wisdom of the decision," the judges said. "The task of the court is to rule upon the lawfulness or legality of the decision."

"Another person in the position of the minister may have not cancelled Mr. Djokovic's visa. The minister

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did," they added.

Djokovic had his visa revoked at Melbourne's airport on Jan. 6 hours after arriving because he wasn't vaccinated against COVID-19. A judge later found that the border officer's decision to cancel the visa was legally unreasonable and restored it.

But Hawke used his sweeping discretion under the Immigration Act to cancel the visa again on Friday on the broad ground of public interest.

Djokovic was a "high profile unvaccinated individual" whose presence in Melbourne "may foster anti-vaccination sentiment" and increase pressure on the health system, Hawke said in his 10-page decision to revoke the visa.

Hawke had rejected Djokovic's arguments that his deportation would appear to be "politically motivated decision-making" that could jeopardize Australia's role as host of the first Grand Slam of the year.

Many argue the government deported Djokovic in response to public anger that an unvaccinated athlete had been allowed into the country without undergoing quarantine, even as the omicron variant strains hospitals, home COVID-19 tests are in short supply and Australians' relatives overseas are barred from visiting because authorities don't recognize their types of vaccines.

The judges rejected Djokovic's three grounds of appeal. The first was that the decision was illogical, irrational or unreasonable. The second was that the minister could not find that Djokovic's presence in Australia may be a risk to health or good order. The third was that the minister could not find Djokovic had a well known stance opposed to vaccination.

"It was open to infer that it was perceived by the public that Mr. Djokovic was not in favor of vaccinations," the judges said.

Djokovic, who returned to Serbia, is in talks with lawyers about suing the Australian government for £3.2million (\$4.4 million) for "ill treatment," the London-based The Sun newspaper reported, citing an unnamed source close to his agent Edoardo Artaldi.

John Karantzis, a partner in Australian firm Carbone Lawyers, said Djokovic could have a case.

"If he concentrates on the ... unreasonable actions he would allege towards him, and not on policy grounds, he may succeed," Karantzis told Seven Network television.

US jobless claims rise to 286,000, highest since October

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits rose to the highest level in three months as the fast-spreading omicron variant continued to disrupt the job market.

Jobless claims rose for the third straight week — by 55,000 to 286,000, highest since mid-October, the Labor Department reported Thursday. The jump in claims marked the biggest one-week increase since mid-July.

The four-week average of claims, which smooths out weekly volatility, rose by 20,000 to 231,000, highest since late November. Economists said that last week's claims may have been inflated by the Labor Department's attempts to tweak the numbers to account for seasonal variations; unadjusted, applications fell last week by more than 83,000.

"We could see one more week of notably higher claims before they should top out," analysts with Contingent Macro Advisors predicted. "This bears close watching going forward."

The Federal Reserve might reconsider plans to ease its massive support for the economy if claims stay above 250,000 as the Fed's March policy meeting approaches, Contingent said.

While the fast-moving omicron variant may cause less severe disease on average, 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 1,800 on Jan. 19 — still below the peak of 3,300 in January 2021.

A surge in COVID-19 cases has set back what had been a strong comeback from last year's short but

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devastating coronavirus recession. Jobless claims, a proxy for layoffs, had fallen mostly steadily for about a year and late last year dipped below the pre-pandemic average of around 220,000 a week.

Altogether, 1.6 million people were collecting jobless aid the week that ended Jan. 8.

Companies are hanging on to workers they have at a time when it's difficult to find replacements. Employers posted 10.6 million job openings in November, the fifth-highest monthly total in records going back to 2000. A record 4.5 million workers quit their jobs in November — a sign that they are confident enough to look something better.

The job market has bounced back from last year's brief but intense coronavirus recession. When COVID-19 hit, governments ordered lockdowns, consumers stayed at home and many businesses closed or cut back hours. Employers slashed millions of jobs in March and April 2020, and the unemployment rate rocketed to 14.7%.

But massive government spending — and eventually the rollout of vaccines — brought the economy back. Last year, employers added a record 6.4 million jobs — but that still was not enough to make up for the unprecedented 9.4 million jobs lost in 2020. And hiring slowed in November and December last year as employers struggled to fill job openings.

Still, the unemployment rate fell last month to a pandemic low 3.9%.

19-year-old woman sets record for solo global flight

RAF CASERT Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — Home! And no longer alone.

The 19-year-old Belgian-British pilot Zara Rutherford set a world record as the youngest woman to fly solo around the world, touching her small airplane down in western Belgium on Thursday — 155 days after she departed.

She made it count for herself, her family and dedicated it to all young women trying to succeed in male-dominated sectors like aviation, and the exact sciences that drive the industry.

"Go for it. It takes a lot of time, patience, a lot of work, but it is incredible," she said after an adventure that gave her as many thrills as scares — from the frozen tundra in Siberia to typhoons in the Philippines and the stark beauty of the Arabian desert.

One time, her one-seater Shark microlight plane filled up with the stench of California wildfires. Often she was flying in absolute solitude over seas or desolate land, any potential rescue hours away. She had to spend weeks isolated in the tiny Siberian village of Ayan with barely any contact with her family or the world she knows.

So little felt as sweet as Thursday's embrace with her pilot parents and brother.

"We will celebrate this by being as a family together, at first," her mother Beatrice said. "I think Zara wants to celebrate by sleeping about two weeks."

When she wakes up, she will find herself in the Guinness World Records book after setting the mark that had been held by 30-year-old American aviator Shaesta Waiz since 2017.

The overall record will remain out of Rutherford's grasp, since Briton Travis Ludlow set that benchmark last year as an 18-year-old.

Her global flight was supposed to take three months, but relentless bad weather and visa issues kept her grounded sometimes for weeks on end, extending her adventure by about two months.

On Thursday, rain, drizzle, sunshine and even a rainbow over Kortrijk airport exemplified the changing, often bad weather she had been facing all too often.

After she was escorted by a four-plane formation in a huge V across much of Belgium, she did a flyby of the airport before finally landing. After waving to the jubilant crowds, she draped herself both in the Union Jack and Belgian tricolor flag.

In her trek of more than 52,000 kilometers (28,000 nautical miles), she stopped over in five continents and visited 41 nations.

Rutherford's flight saw her steer clear of wildfires in California, deal with biting cold over Russia and

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narrowly avoid North Korean airspace. She flew by Visual Flight Rules, basically going on sight only, often slowing down progress when more sophisticated systems could have led her through clouds and fog.

Sometimes she feared for her life, and at other times she simply yearned for the simple comforts of home. Flying runs in her blood since both her parents are pilots and she has been traveling in small planes since she was 6. At 14, she started flying herself.

Pretty soon, the dream of flying round the world grew in her head.

"But I never thought it would be possible. I thought that it is too difficult, too dangerous, too expensive," she said.

For the money part, sponsorship and people's contributions took care of it. For the danger and difficulty factor, she did it herself.

Timing-wise it fit in perfectly between high school and university.

"I thought, actually, this is the perfect opportunity to do something crazy and fly around the world," she said.

With the final touchdown, the teenager wants to infuse young women and girls worldwide with the spirit of aviation — and an enthusiasm for studies in the exact sciences, mathematics, engineering and technology.

In September she hopes to be off to a university in Britain or the United States to study electrical engineering.

Ghislaine Maxwell requests new trial after juror interviews

NEW YORK (AP) — Ghislaine Maxwell has formally requested a new trial, less than a month after her conviction on sex trafficking charges.

In a Wednesday letter to U.S. District Judge Alison J. Nathan, Maxwell lawyer Bobbi Sternheim said the motion for a new trial had been filed under seal and requested that all submissions related to "Juror No. 50 remain under seal until the Court rules."

The motion for a new trial had been promised by Maxwell's lawyers, who had raised concerns about media interviews following the verdict in which the juror said he had been sexually abused as a child. The anonymous juror told The Independent and The Daily Mail that his experience helped him convince some jurors that a victim's imperfect memory of sex abuse doesn't mean it didn't happen.

Nathan had set a Wednesday deadline for Maxwell's lawyers to file for a new trial, and said prosecutors should reply by Feb. 2.

Maxwell, 60, was convicted in late December of conspiring to recruit and groom teenage girls to be sexually abused by her longtime companion Jeffrey Epstein. Her sentencing date has yet to be set.

Maxwell's lawyers had previously said the request for a new trial would include all known undisputed remarks of the juror, along with recorded statements and the questionnaire all jurors filled out. Potential jurors were asked to fill out a questionnaire asking: "Have you or a friend or family member ever been the victim of sexual harassment, sexual abuse, or sexual assault?"

Quoting from the press reports in a letter, prosecutors said the juror asserted that he "flew through" the questionnaire and didn't recall being asked if he'd been a victim of sex abuse. Prosecutors called for any juror investigation to be "conducted exclusively under the supervision of the Court." The juror himself has retained a lawyer.

Maxwell has maintained she's innocent, and her family promised an appeal of her conviction. Her lawyers vigorously fought the charges against her during trial, arguing that she was being used as a scapegoat by prosecutors determined to hold someone accountable for Epstein's crimes after the financier and convicted sex offender killed himself while awaiting trial in 2019.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, Jan. 21, the 21st day of 2022. There are 344 days left in the year.

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Today's Highlight in History:

On Jan. 21, 2010, a bitterly divided U.S. Supreme Court, in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, vastly increased the power of big business and labor unions to influence government decisions by freeing them to spend their millions directly to sway elections for president and Congress.

On this date:

In 1793, during the French Revolution, King Louis XVI, condemned for treason, was executed on the guillotine.

In 1910, the Great Paris Flood began as the rain-swollen Seine River burst its banks, sending water into the French capital.

In 1915, the first Kiwanis Club, dedicated to community service, was founded in Detroit.

In 1924, Russian revolutionary Vladimir Lenin died at age 53.

In 1942, pinball machines were banned in New York City after a court ruled they were gambling devices that relied on chance rather than skill (the ban was lifted in 1976).

In 1950, former State Department official Alger Hiss, accused of being part of a Communist spy ring, was found guilty in New York of lying to a grand jury. (Hiss, who proclaimed his innocence, served less than four years in prison.)

In 1954, the first atomic submarine, the USS Nautilus, was launched at Groton (GRAH'-tuhn), Connecticut (however, the Nautilus did not make its first nuclear-powered run until nearly a year later).

In 1976, British Airways and Air France inaugurated scheduled passenger service on the supersonic Concorde jet.

In 1977, on his first full day in office, President Jimmy Carter pardoned almost all Vietnam War draft evaders.

In 2003, the Census Bureau announced that Hispanics had surpassed blacks as America's largest minority group.

In 2009, the Senate confirmed Hillary Rodham Clinton as secretary of state.

In 2020, the U.S. reported its first known case of the new virus circulating in China, saying a Washington state resident who had returned the previous week from the outbreak's epicenter was hospitalized near Seattle; U.S. officials stressed that they believed the overall risk of the virus to the American public remained low.

Ten years ago: Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich scored an upset win in the South Carolina Republican presidential primary, dealing a sharp setback to Mitt Romney.

Five years ago: A day after Donald Trump's inauguration, more than 1 million people rallied at women's marches in the nation's capital and cities around the world to send the new president an emphatic message that they wouldn't let his agenda go unchallenged. The Southeast saw the beginning of a weekend outbreak of tornadoes and severe thunderstorms; sixteen people were killed in Georgia, four people died in Mississippi and one death was reported in Florida.

One year ago: On his first full day in office, President Joe Biden signed 10 executive orders aimed at combating the coronavirus pandemic, including one broadening the use of the Defense Production Act to expand vaccine production; he also signed an order mandating masks for travel, including in airports and on planes, ships, trains, buses and public transportation. After being largely sidelined in the final months of the Trump administration, Dr. Anthony Fauci returned to the White House briefing room to provide an update on the pandemic. The U.S. said it would resume funding for the World Health Organization; the funding had been halted by the Trump administration.

Today's Birthdays: World Golf Hall of Famer Jack Nicklaus is 82. Opera singer-conductor Placido Domingo is 81. Actor Jill Eikenberry is 75. Country musician Jim Ibbotson is 75. Singer-songwriter Billy Ocean is 72. Former U.S. Ambassador to China Gary Locke is 72. Former U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder is 71. Actor-director Robby Benson is 66. Actor Geena Davis is 66. Sen. Kevin Cramer, R-N.D., is 61. Basketball Hall of Famer Hakeem Olajuwon is 59. Actor Charlotte Ross is 54. Actor John Ducey is 53. Actor Karina Lombard is 53. Actor Ken Leung is 52. Rock musician Mark Trojanowski (Sister Hazel) is 52. Rock singer-songwriter

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Cat Power is 50. Rock DJ Chris Kilmore (Incubus) is 49. Actor Vincent Laresca is 48. Singer Emma Bunton (Spice Girls) is 46. Actor Jerry Trainor is 45. Country singer Phil Stacey is 44. R&B singer Nokio is 43. Actor Izabella Miko (MEE'-koh) is 41. Actor Luke Grimes is 38. Actor Feliz Ramirez is 30.